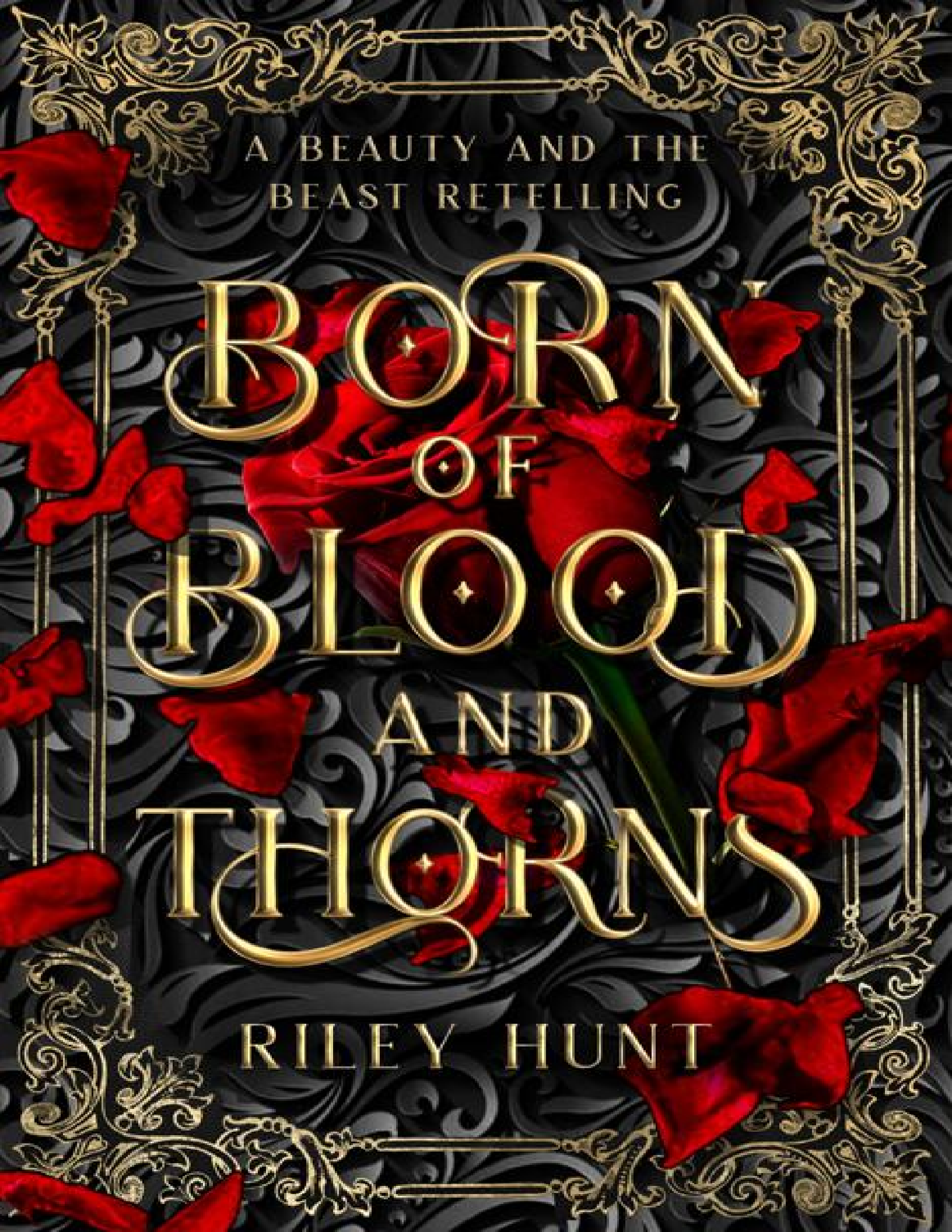
A BEAUTY AND THE BEAST RETELLING
BORN OF BLOOD AND THORNS
RILEY HUNT

BORN OF BLOOD AND THORNS

RILEY HUNT

PUBLISHED FOR ENEMIES EVER AFTER

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To Hannah who like me, may have watched Beauty and the Beast and later in life thought to herself , I'd bang the Beast for that library.
This one's for you xoxo

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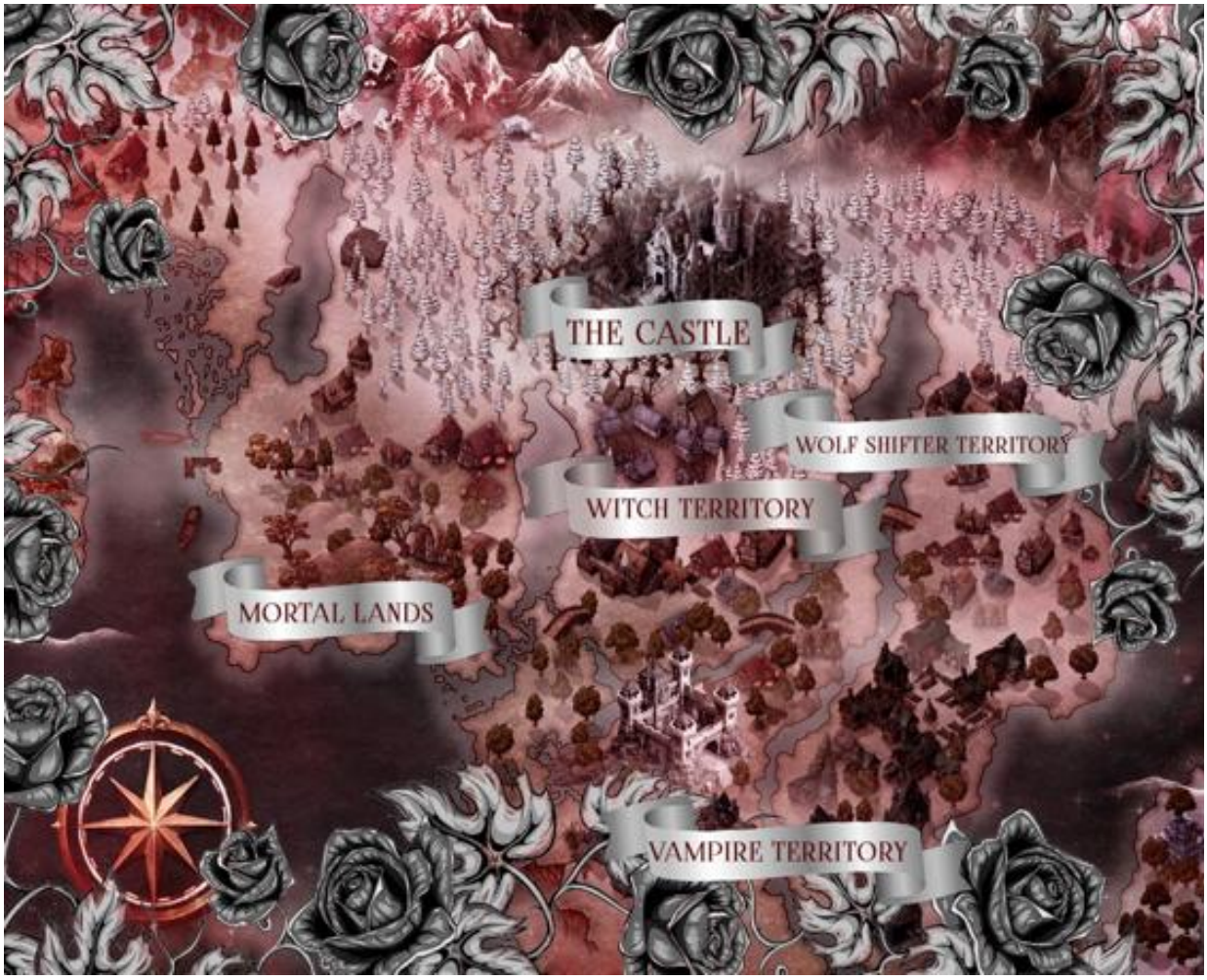
THE CASTLE
WOLF SHIFTER TERRITORY
WITCH TERRITORY
MORTAL LANDS
VAMPIRE TERRITORY

Content Warning

This book has a touch more spice than the rest of the set.
Including:
Parental Abuse
Threat of Sexual Assault (to main character by a minor character.)
Violence
Multiple open door explicit sex scenes.

Please proceed with caution.

Prologue

"Pleeease, Nan," the little girl begged, her blue eyes wide and imploring. "Tell me the story of the dragon prince."

Nan settled into the rocking chair beside the bed, her joints creaking. "That's a sad tale, child. Why would you want to hear it?"

The girl snuggled deeper under her quilt. "I like sad stories sometimes."

With a sigh, Nan reached out a wrinkled hand to smooth back the girl's pale hair. "Very well." She leaned back, letting her mind drift into the past.

"Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away, lived a dragon prince. He was strong and brave, with scales that shone like crimson jewels in the sun. All his people, the dragon kingdom, loved him for his wisdom and kindness."

The girl smiled, her eyelids drooping. "And he was pretty."

"Yes, very pretty." Nan chuckled. "Now hush, no more interruptions." She went on, spinning images of the dragon prince of the Sun Clan Kingdom and his sworn enemies, the Moon Clan. Of the peace-loving princess who tried to unite them, only to die at the hands of hatred and heartbreak.

The girl's breaths deepened into sleep, but still, Nan spoke on, telling of the Moon Goddess Nyx's fury. Her word continued with the curse that froze the prince in his beastly form and his kingdom in time, their fates forgotten as time marched on without them.

"But curses can be broken," she whispered, rising creakily from her chair. She brushed a kiss over the girl's forehead. "Perhaps this one will be

too.”

CHAPTER 1

Bella

I gripped the rare newspaper, the rough paper rubbing my callused fingers. The headline blared from the paper written in the sun goddess's territory. I clutched it tightly as if it would disintegrate if I let go. Anything written outside our territory, much less from the rival clan, was hard to find, forbidden even.

> ***Horrific Discovery: Six Sun Goddess Shifters Found Mutilated in Cursed Lands of Moon Goddess!***
> Six bodies were found outside the village, torn apart and gnawed on. All shifters that belonged to the Sun goddess were unfortunate enough to find themselves in the cursed lands of the moon goddess...

I quickly skimmed the article.

> *The bite marks indicated it was a wolf attack. The only shifters that belonged to the moon territory are now fighting and attacking the brothers and sisters it left behind.*

A howl pulled my gaze from the words of the article I clutched. I'd found it discarded in a bin as I walked the chilly way to the bookstore. Someone was smuggling outside paraphernalia in. If they saw me with it,

I'd be the next victim found in a field, dead and covered in bite marks, if I was lucky. There were worse things than death.

My breath hitched, and a plum of white formed as I exhaled sharply. I didn't remember it being this cold this early into spring. Everything seemed stuck in winter's embrace, as if she were reluctant to release her hold and let spring take over. The seasons were fickle like that.

Six was an ungodly number of bodies, but how they were found meant they had made a terrible decision. One that brought them directly into the forbidden forest. Legend had it that was the most straightforward path back to the sun goddess's lands.

Rumors also said that these lands were technically a part of her territory, but the moon goddess had claimed them long ago. The wolf shifter beside me bumped my shoulder and snarled as if it were my fault. His teeth flashed as they elongated slightly, a growl reverberating deep from his chest. I wanted to glare and shout, but it would only worsen things. So I did what I knew I was supposed to do. I averted my eyes until he passed.

The wolves were once on the side of the sun, but centuries ago, they willingly let themselves be bound to the moon. Leaving the wolves no choice but to shift under her gaze when she reached her highest in the night sky. Though they still had the power to transform at all times, the full moon brought out an undeniable urge within them. As if it were a command from a higher power - and only then could their human forms be left behind.

The nearer the full moon, the more agitated they became, their suppressed rage boiling over until it was impossible to contain. They shed their human skin, transforming into a feral and relentless version of themselves, driven by instinct and hunger for power.

I prayed we didn't have any incidents today.

The heavy wooden door creaked open as the senior man before me unlatched it and stepped aside. I walked into the dimly lit sanctuary of the small bookstore. Thanking the gods in a silent prayer that I made it in one piece.

"Morning, Bella," said Mr. Bingsley, the elderly shopkeeper who had taken pity on me many months ago and given me a job here. Though he was a wolf shifter, his age had mellowed him so much that he seemed more like a kindly grandfather than an apex predator.

Still, I could sense the underlying tension between us—vampires and wolves, though on the same side, tended not to like one another for whatever reason. I tried not to be too offended; after all, there was some truth to the idea of rival predators. Still, I couldn't deny feeling hurt by the prejudice. After all, I wasn't a vampire.

Not really. Being half of something still made me the enemy, even though I had the same weaknesses as any other mortal. I could see better in the dark, be stronger, and move faster than other humans. When I compared myself to vampires and shifters, it became apparent how powerless I truly was.

"Good morning, Mr. Bingsley," I replied, brushing past him as I made my way to the back room. My job in this shifter village was simple: keep the books organized, assist customers, and stay out of trouble. The latter was easier said than done.

"Watch yourself today, dear," he warned, his eyes filled with a wariness that could be perceived as concern, but I knew better." The alphas are restless, and you know how they feel about you."

"Thanks for the reminder," I said through a tight, stretched smile. Like I didn't already know. It wasn't like I needed a reminder of how much the villagers mistrusted and despised me – a half-breed, an abomination in their eyes.

The door dinged with the arrival of our first customer. I quickly put aside all my feelings and pasted on another smile, ready for a difficult day.

A gruff voice called out, asking for a book on werewolf lore. I handed him the book, but he gave me a disdainful look before leaving. The door chimed at the arrival of more customers as the day progressed.

"See?" I grumbled to myself as I returned to my duties. "They can't even look at me without sneering."

"Can you blame them, though?" chimed a snide voice, and I turned to see Tessa, the local shifter gossip, leaning against a bookshelf with her arms crossed. "You're a half-breed blood sucker. You don't belong here."

"Fuck off, Tessa," I snapped, my temper flaring. "I don't have time for your petty bullshit today."

"Fine," she huffed, flicking her long blond hair over her shoulder as she sauntered away. "But remember, you'll never be one of us."

As I muttered the words, "Who said I wanted to be?" my heart felt like a caged bird beating against its prison—like the walls of this cold room,

which kept me locked inside, with no escape from the crushing wave of loneliness and isolation.

My hunger twisted around me like a giant snake squeezing tight until I thought I would scream. With every breath, the fog inside me felt thicker and heavier, dragging me down as if I were standing in quicksand.

Nothing mattered more than this job and my desperate need for food. So I clamped my mouth shut, binding it tighter than a rope, and swallowed all of my pride in exchange for the cheapest scraps of sustenance. All I needed was enough to get by.

Mr. Bingsley forced a hollow smile and inquired, "Everything all right, sweetheart?" His hand gripped my shoulder in forced familiarity.

"Fine," I lied, swallowing the lump in my throat. "Just another day in paradise."

My life might be far from perfect, but I held onto the hope that one day things would change. When they did, I'd be ready to spread my wings and prove them all wrong. I was more than grateful for this job even if it came with… challenges.

We moved often, my father and me. He cared little for me, and I soon forgot the feeling of being safe and warm. We'd been in this town longer than any other—no one wanted our shack, so they let us stay. In a town full of shifters, my father could hold his own. On the other hand, things were more challenging for me.

My stomach grumbled loudly; the hunger pangs wracked my body and caused me to double over. I clenched my fists and fought hard against tears, fearing any sign of weakness would make me vulnerable. I prayed Mr. Bingsley would bring me some food. As a half-vampire, death from hunger was not easy, but the pain was relentless.

All I needed was a tiny crumb of bread to keep me alive and in constant agony without the sweet release of death. I couldn't survive on blood; essentially, I was still mostly human. I had forgotten what it felt like to have a full belly and to be loved.

The store cleared out. I was thankful. It was in the moments when no one was in the store that I loved the most. It was me and the books and knickknacks, my favorite kind of solitary companions.

As far as curses go, I suppose there are worst ones, I thought. I stood staring at the meager library as my palms began to itch. The full moon

made my skin itch and crawl, so I, too, was not unaffected, only I didn't snap and snarl. I could just feel it.

As the full moon rose in the sky, the shifters were restless as they growled and grumbled, eyeing me with distaste as they bared their teeth and clenched their jaws against the animalistic urge to become full-on predators looking for prey. I just itched.

A blessing I supposed.

Only, I wasn't prey. I was a predator—the ultimate predator or, well, at least, the potential predator. Even if that predator were hidden beneath my skin, waiting until the day she was awakened. I knew only part of what I was, and if it were up to me, I'd do anything not to become that creature. The dead reeked, and so did the undead.

And who wanted to never see the sun again?

I loved the sun. I guess I was already a candidate for the worst vampire. Even as a half-vampire, I had the potential to become full—if I wanted. But I didn't. I would rather starve and die.

I glimpsed a vibrant purple book with silver letters that shimmered in the light. It was Isla and Adrian, a vampire fairytale love story. I knew it but couldn't reach it—my short stature denied me.

I turned toward Mr. Bingsley's chair, still pulled out and waiting for its occupant to return. I walked over to it and lifted it up with little effort despite the thick wood of the large chair. I dropped it right before the book that beckoned me from above.

I climbed onto the sturdy chair and snatched the book triumphantly, only to get hit full in the face by a massive cloud of dust. The combination of dust and the musty smell of books that had not been cleaned in a long time assaulted my heightened sense of smell, making me sneeze.

The once sturdy chair wobbled from its force, slamming my body into the shelf of books. The bookcase broke and rained down onto my now prone body as I lay on the cold, hard floor, covered in dust, books, and damaged wood. The book I'd wanted so severely clutched still in my arms in the destruction of the corner shelf of the bookstore.

I sighed loudly, feeling the weight of my situation pressing down on me. Despite the dustiness and age of the books that filled Mr. Bingsley's store, he took such care in preserving them, almost as if they were his own children. It was why he had gradually warmed up to me.

We shared a love for books in a world where life was too hard and harsh to partake in such leisurely pleasures. At least not for peasants. Which was what I appeared to be. Which was what the whole world needed to believe I was. With as poor as we were now, I suppose there was no need to pretend— I just was.

The door chimed, and I stiffened, a book still split open atop my head. Gideon stepped through the door, his ebony hair swept back and tucked behind his ears. His piercing amber gaze traveled over my body with such intensity that I felt exposed and vulnerable under its scrutiny.

"Great, the day just keeps getting better," I muttered. I knew he heard me. Wolf shifters had exceptional hearing. They could hear a pin drop in the house next to them. My hearing was good but not half as good as theirs.

Gideon had been my tormentor since day one, and not in the way you would think. He decided he would make me his mate once I moved into town. Some odd idea that I was meant for him, that I was too pretty to be left in a shack with my father. He was rescuing me from my predicament and making me his mate. The only problem was that I didn't want to be his mate, and I didn't want his rescuing. I'd rather starve than let him claim me.

I had been weak one night, and I had wanted to feel something. Anything but loneliness and hunger and heartbreak. I had let him take the last thing I had kept as mine; my virginity. It had been the most disappointing night of my life. Now, he thought I was his because he’d bent me over like a dog. Men were so stupid.

I almost groaned aloud but instead, I put on a fake smile that showed far too many teeth. For a moment, I wished I had fangs to scare Gideon off.

"Good afternoon, Gideon." I tried to stand as I smoothed the wrinkles from my dress and then proceeded to tame my hair. Not because I cared what I looked like to him, but to give my hands something to do rather than to wrap them around his throat. That would be suicide. Fun suicide, but it would end in death all the same.

"It looks like you need saving." He smirked before strutting in, taking up the room with his massive size. He was a big lump of muscle; most of the women and many of the men in the town found him attractive. But his

brain, the size of a pea, made me want to escape him as quickly as possible. That, and he was unbearable to be around.

A dumb alpha was a dangerous combination.

"No, I'm okay. It's just an accident I intend to clean up." I smiled tentatively as I reassured him, keeping my voice calm and mellow, my gaze not meeting his—anything to keep him calm. I was careful not to antagonize him or call the beast that lurked just under the surface.

Even in my peripheral vision, I could see the creature barely contained beneath his skin, a monster struggling to break free from its bonds. One that would leave carnage just as the people in the article had found themselves. This beast meant harm to me, and I knew it.

It made me want to bare my teeth and growl, but I clutched my hands tightly and forced my breathing steady. Refusing to submit to my desire to meet his challenge of dominance. I repeated in my head—Choose your battles. Live to fight another day, preferably on a day you can win. I chanted this in my head until the tension began to unspool itself.

He lifted an eyebrow, moving slowly forward while trying to catch my gaze. I backed up against the ruined shelf, slipping over a book on my way as I righted myself. His towering body boxed me in as I pressed my lips tightly together.

Do not react, Isabella, I cautioned myself before lifting my chin and glaring at him as I held his stare. I knew he would take it as a challenge, but when cornered, I had to do whatever I needed to get out of it. Even if it pissed him off.

I was doing what I swore I wouldn't do, challenging him. It wasn't a good idea to hold the stare of an alpha wolf, but I was tired of his bullying. His beast snarled, his eyes shining bright amber in the dimly lit shop as he leaned in to breathe in my scent.

"I can't wait to claim you, break you, and make you mine," he threatened as he pushed his massive body against mine.

I gritted my teeth and fought the urge to scream out of sheer disgust as he pressed his bulky frame against me. His thick hands moved to my hips, forming a vice-like grip that made me wince in pain. A wave of adrenaline surged through me, and my anger bubbled up. My arm whipped around before I could contain it, connecting squarely with the side of his jaw. He released his hold and stumbled back at the force of the blow.

"Just because we slept together once doesn't give you the right to harass me at every turn," I snapped, pressing my lips together as I realized what I'd said.

"On the contrary, sweetheart. It gives me all the rights." He trailed his fingers down my jaw and then my neck as he stared at me, his eyes glowing golden from the wolf within him. He and his wolf wanted to take me, bite me, and tell the world I belonged to him, like property. "I think we can make that claim here and now."

Wolves had to claim their mates in a two-part ritual. They first had to mate with them physically, and while their bodies were connected, the wolf's soul would connect to his mate's as he bit her. Or she bit him with a mark imbued by magic on a full moon.

There would be a ritual where the mate would share with the other pack members. Usually, the female would get passed around. It was disgusting and disturbing, and I wanted no part of any of it. If I could take that night back so long ago, I would because, not only had it been short, regretful, and disappointing, it had also brought me trouble ever since.

"I've been patient with you," Gideon whispered next to my ear. "I have been good."

I almost rolled my eyes. Good meant he had, on a few occasions, given me food when I was close to death.

I slapped him hard across the face when his lips began to caress my jaw and neck, and his hands reached around my back.

"Get off me," I snarled, half begging. A small voice in the back of my head whispered, maybe this will be a better trade. Give him your body, and you can have food and more warmth. I shook my head, refusing to let that dark thought take credence within me.

The smirk that crept across his face was my first sign of danger. He grabbed my wrists and pulled me closer, using one hand to hold both together until they ached. In an instant, I snapped my head sideways, smashing his nose with a sickening crunch. His grip loosened ever so slightly as I kneed him hard in the groin, freeing myself from his tight grasp. He dropped to the ground, whimpering and then howling in outraged pain.

"I am not yours," I spat before picking up the sizeable hardback book I'd dropped earlier and slamming it into his head repeatedly before he lay motionless on the ground. He wouldn’t remain so for long.

The door dinged again. I turned to see Mr. Bingsley with his mouth open, staring in abject horror at my violence.

"Isabella!" he exclaimed, his eyes widening as he looked around the room in disbelief. His face turned an angry red hue, and his nostrils flared as he seemed to wrestle with himself. For a moment, I thought he would defend me, but instead, he shook his head. "Get out!" he shouted, an unfamiliar bitterness coating his words. "I should have known better—you vamps are all the same. Cockroaches of death."

I cringed and stepped back as if he had struck me. “Please, Mr. Bingsley. I didn’t ask to be touched. He attacked me. He did this!” I pointed at Gideon, pleading.

I couldn't lose this job. I watched as Bingsley's eyes softened for a fraction of a minute before his gaze flicked to the tall, imposing figure of the alpha wolf behind me. His eyes turned back to me, hard as steel.

"I said get out." His voice rumbled through me, searing through me in a painful burn that made me almost clutch my chest to see if it were an actual wound.

"Please," I tried one last time, hearing my voice catch as I swallowed back the sob that was forming. "This was a misunderstanding, I'm sorry."

"You heard him, little viper. Get out," Gideon demanded, a deadly edge to his words. "Wolves will always be loyal to wolves first."

I turned to him, baring my own slightly pointed canines. For the first time ever, I wished I was a full vampire so I could rip his throat out. So I could bleed him to death and watch as the life left his eyes. I wasn't. I was the least powerful person in this room.

"Leave," Mr. Bingley said again, more firmly but with a little less venom in his tone.

"Yes, little cockroach, scatter off," Gideon added. Mr. Bingsley did not correct him, come to my defense, or deny his slurs. He had called me the same.

The pain of his words hit me harder than I had expected, and I almost opened my mouth to defend myself. I sighed, realizing there was no use. This feeling of betrayal was worse because, for once, I had actually thought I had made a friend in this strange world. It was foolish to think differently; there were no friends for people like me. Grabbing onto the book tightly, I marched toward the door and cast one last glance over my shoulder. He recoiled and stepped back, turning away from me.

It was like a punch to my gut. I had heard these words and seen these reactions countless times before, but this time it felt different. I thought I had finally found someone who would understand me and accept me enough that I could feel less alone. But I was wrong. There was no one for me in this cruel world. With a heavy sigh, I marched toward the door, but not before clutching ahold of the blood-covered book that I'd risked so much for.

"Fine, if you don't want to hear me out, then I'm keeping this." I shook the book at his back as droplets of blood splattered his way. Snatching up my cloak as it toppled the coat hanger, I snarled loud like the vampire they expected me to be. Mr. Bingsley tensed, his back still facing me as a show of disrespect.

As if it were I who dared to cast him out with nothing more than a few books falling off a shelf. Gideon, who I wanted to kick all over again, wore a pleased smile on his pretty face.

I clenched my jaw, struggling not to reveal the pain that gnawed at my gut as I clenched my fists and marched out of the door. The sound of glass shattering into pieces around me surrounded me like a chorus of angry screams as I slammed the door hard enough to break it, mirroring the rage that coursed through me.

Any chance of him allowing me back was now gone. My rage boiled over, and I roared to the heavens, letting the punishing downpour wash away my fury like a heavenly offering.

I should have kept my mouth shut.

I should have groveled.

I should have begged.

I should have...

The wind and rain pelted my face, echoing the conflict inside me. Matching my anger with its own, drenching me to my very soul. I wanted nothing more than to remain human, to keep living life as an ordinary mortal until I was old and feeble.

But with every step I took on this journey, something stood in my way. I had no control over the rage that coursed through my veins or the way my stomach ached and my steps faulted as they felt like lead with the lack of fuel I'd had. My thoughts fell into a morose tailspin. I was starving. Only my half-vampire nature kept me from dying.

I had a sinking feeling in my gut that tonight would be a night where my stomach growled until it ached. My bones gnawed in an entirely different way as the cold crept upon me in my sleep.

However hard fate pushed against me, I would refuse to surrender, determined to take back control and make this road mine.

I just had to survive first. Which was infinitely easier said than done.

CHAPTER 2

Bella

The rain turned into an onslaught of water pouring down from the heavens as the clouds obscured the sun behind its dreary great pillows. The breeze picked up, making the water hit in violent thrashes. The wind roared like an angry beast and whipped my hair into a frenzy.

It slammed into me, nearly knocking me off balance as I clutched onto my book for dear life. My arms shielded my face from the onslaught of debris flying through the air. I clutched it harder under my cloak, praying the pages were not damaged aside from the blood.

It felt like a baptism under heaven's wrathful gaze. Which god or goddess had been angered was anyone's guess.

The street emptied as people ran for cover. They didn't look at me even as they forced their way past me, careless and uncaring about this angry half-breed who was blocking their way. They couldn't see past the soaking dark cloak that shielded most of my form except for my narrowed eyes and frowning lips.

Raindrops slid down from the brim of my hood, hitting the ground around me in an unceasing cadence. At times, they came down so hard and heavy that I could see nothing but white water before me for minutes at a time. This storm wasn't normal; it had been building since early morning and was now reaching its peak as night fell upon us. Lightning crashed all around, followed immediately by ominous thunderclaps that shook the earth beneath our home.

"All that for a book, you stupid girl," I muttered as I continued down the street. It had been more than just about a book. I felt the sting of the rejection like a hard slap across the face.

Hope was deadly, yet I clung to it like a life raft. Passing an abandoned food cart, I snagged some old and dingy carrots, which would do for now. My stomach clenched, but I shoved them in my pocket instead: at least I could live today. Tomorrow was another story.

"Isabella!" called my father's voice from inside my mind, jolting me out of my reverie. I glanced around the dreary, muddy street, realizing I'd been lost in my bitter thoughts.

I trudged through the wet path, my shoes quickly becoming muddier. I dreaded entering the cramped, damp quarters I shared with my father in the shifter village. Our one-room shack was little more than a glorified hovel with a dirt floor and leaking roof. I barged through the door, the walls shaking at the force. It wasn't exactly cozy, but some areas didn't get rain, and a fireplace gave heat—it would do.

I slammed down the book on the empty table, its pages rustling in protest before I sank into the rickety chair that groaned beneath my weight. It was such folly—why had I been so invested in this doomed plan?

Apparently, the chair had it out to get me, too. It leaned precariously to the side, threatening to fall to pieces beneath me. I expected nothing less.

I inspected the book, wiping my hands on my semi dry pants as I dropped the cloak back onto the chair. The blood mainly had only hit the outside portion of the book, its slick leather seemingly waterproof as I could wipe it off with my dark tunic. Then I cringed, realizing I now smelled like blood.

I smelled like dinner.

The floorboards beneath my feet creaked with a sinister groan as if the house had a hidden crypt lurking deep within its foundations. The crypt inhabitant waking, which it did. And he was.

My gaze drifted to the only window in the room, its surface obscured by a splintered crack. Rain pelted against it, creating a raging river of motion.

Squinting into the darkness, I tried to make out the time of day through the gray tones and rushing water. The moon stayed hidden behind thick clouds as the rain calmed enough to be seen. We rarely lit fires, and winter air nipped at my wet skin. I longed for the sun's warmth and feared hunger or cold would kill me. My mind focused on its rays, and I could almost feel their warmth wrap around me. The mind was a powerful thing.

The sun was my comfort; the sun filled me with pleasure I knew I shouldn't have as a half-vampire. As a child, I had loved basking in its warmth, feeling the rays against my skin. That was until jealousy from my uncle's court started making me more cautious. The sun smelled sweet, like candied sugar, and despite not having felt its warmth for many years, it could be smelled on my skin.

Vampires were jealous, vicious creatures. I learned quickly that I needed to avoid it; too much sun meant longer and more painful baths to scrub it off my skin, and orange blossoms became mandatory whenever I ventured out. They loathed the smell of citrus almost as much as they loathed me. Win-win, in my opinion.

"Did you have an eventful day, my dear?" a smooth voice from the shadows said. My heart beat wildly as I turned to face the bitterly cold silver eyes that seemed to call out to me.

I rolled my eyes in exhaustion. "Whenever do I not have an eventful day in this town?" I groaned, resting my elbows on the table and dropping my head into my hands.

The air shifted as he moved closer than before, taking his usual seat across from me with a stern look on his face—it never changed. He was beautiful yet deadly—my father. Despite knowing deep down how dangerous he was, something about him always drew me in.

This scared the shit out of me.

I held his gaze, not worrying for once that he would enact punishment. I knew he would—it was just a matter of when. He had a stern look on his face. I stared at him for a long moment, noting the same cold detachment that permanently marred his perfect features, the cruel tilt of his lips.

"I can smell it in the air, the scent of fresh shifter blood. What did you do?" He leaned forward, and his silver eyes shifted to storm clouds like

mine. They darkened and narrowed until they were almost entirely black. His long nails curved into sharp talons, and his incisors lengthened as he smiled cruelly. "Tell me, Isabella—what mischief have you been up to this time?"

He tried to disguise his words with a sickly sweet tone, but nothing was reassuring about them. I knew that if I told him about Gideon's attack on me, he'd fly into an uncontrollable rage. The undead are especially prone to uncontrolled outbursts during the hour after rising, and since he was over a thousand years old, his would be far worse than most.

It wouldn't be Gideon he blamed, no. He'd blame me. He always blamed me. I was the reason our kingdom was destroyed, I was the reason we lived in a hovel in a shifter village, and I was the reason we had nothing. I was the reason for all our bad luck and all our heartache. It made me wonder more than once if I was indeed the reason for all the bad that had befallen us. Why hadn’t he just abandon me years ago?

I could only be so lucky.

I took a deep breath and slowed my heart rate, trying to look as calm as possible. "It was nothing," I said carefully, giving my father a hesitant smile. "Gideon just slipped and hit his head—I helped him." I pressed my lips together, biting my bottom lip as I forced my heartbeat slow and steady. I licked my dry lips, trying not to flick my eyes to the book on the table.

He hadn't always been this way.

My father, Prince Roderick Val'Draco, had once been heir to the vampire kingdom. After the sorceress cursed our family and toppled the regime, we were outcasts clinging to delusions of reclaiming our rightful power.

He had once been kind and benevolent, as warmhearted as a vampire could be. His name was praised throughout the kingdom like a prince in its shining glory before the sorceress appeared. The mask he had held vanished, the pretending stopped, and his true nature emerged. There was no one important watching anymore, I supposed.

Not that life at the Vampire Court had been pleasant besides my nanny. I had no one. I was a half-mortal child, never considered a princess, and nothing but vermin to the vampire. Many times, they would find ways to hurt me, kick me, throw me down. A few times, they had got around to

biting me. I was barely old enough to walk the first time I had been bit. It had been a nice little snack for them.

They had been warned and reprimanded verbally but never punished for how they'd treated me. I was never allowed to play with other children because I was beneath them. I had lived a lonely existence as a child. Despite this, I had gotten back up each time they had knocked me down.

It was one of the many reasons I refused to turn. I didn't want to become cruel. I didn't want to be a vampire, clinging to my immortality. My human side was everything to me. My nan had been mortal and human, and she had been kind.

The love he held for me, the love he pretended to have, was fake and only upon his convenience, now it no longer existed. As all he had for me was contempt and blame. I was the reason for all his problems. No longer the cute, half-breed daughter he could occasionally pretend to love. Just a burden he couldn't get rid of.

I remembered the sorceress vividly; her icy white hair flowed like a river around her naked form as she had strolled carelessly through the palace gates. Her eyes were like sapphires frozen in time, radiating with a chill of terror that shivered up my spine as she'd approached.

Some said she was a goddess if the rumors were true, for it only took one angry glance from those sapphire eyes for an entire kingdom to crumble at her feet. I'd never forget the moment she turned her gaze on me; instead of hatred or cruelty, as I had found in so many other immortal beings before her, I had felt a strange connection that seemed to flow between us.

I'd reached out for her, my heart heavy with the hope that maybe this being would be different. Yet she'd shook her head, denying me once again. With an earth-shattering roar, our kingdom had toppled beneath her divine wrath.

I'd huddled beneath a rock that threatened to crush me at any moment, hidden from her view. I had seen her pause and turn her head as if she'd heard or seen me. I'd held my breath, waiting, praying that if she ended me, it would be quick.

She'd walked past me like I was nothing, as if I were buried in the rubble. I didn't remember how I had been saved and pulled out. Only I knew it wasn't until daylight that I knew the danger had passed.

As if the sorceress had known the moon goddess, Nyx, wouldn't mind if she destroyed one of her kingdoms. As if she had her support. I hated the gods and goddesses; they were so fickle and cruel. I refused to pray to any of them.

I supposed I should have been horrified by the news of my uncle and his closest members from the Vampire Court being dead, but I hadn’t been. After all, they were even crueler to me than anyone else. Walking through that palace had always been a delicate task, as a half-breed, human princess like me had been seen as a tempting snack.

My hand moved instinctively to my neck, where I knew the scar of a rather viscous bite showed. My fingers felt the rough edges of the ruined skin. Having been bitten before I could even walk, I had quickly grown to despise my father's people. The only things I had regretted losing were a warm place to sleep, a constant food supply, and my nanny, who’d happened to be the only person who had ever shown me a hint of love in my short life.

If only the shifters knew we held the same dislike of vampires, maybe they'd hate me less, but I doubted it.

"Clean this up and eat now. Your stomach is giving me a headache." Roderick hissed, his nostrils flaring. His eyes glowed red, a stark contrast to his gaunt, pale face. "You waste enough time at that pitiful excuse for a job. Hurry up and lock down the house so I can leave."

"Of course, Father," I muttered, my stomach growling again.

He closed his eyes tighter as if my extreme hunger annoyed him. I picked up a knife and thought about stabbing him with it. Regrettably, it wouldn't kill him, it would only piss him off. Instead of arguing, I went to the cabinet to peer into it, hoping to find something to cook with the carrots but knowing I would see nothing. A deep ache clutched at the emptiness inside me, almost taking me to my knees.

I gritted my teeth and pushed through it. Wondering, not for the first time, how long it would take a half-vampire to starve to death. A vampire would live shriveled up and in pain for eternity. But a half-vampire, there was no telling. It could be today if I were lucky, or this pain could continue forever if I were unlucky.

I glanced over to where he still sat, looking out the dirty, cracked windowpane as if he were lost in a past that was long since gone. The

fallen vampire prince left the kingdom with only his half-breed daughter to suffer through his pitiful fall from grace.

"One day, I will have my revenge and take back what was stolen from me," Roderick muttered as he gazed out the grimy window into the darkness.

I tensed, unease creeping down my spine. I knew all too well the lengths my father would go to regain his lost glory. His pride and cruelty knew no limits.

I shook my head and continued my search, more concerned with survival than his bottomless pit of despair and grandiose ideas of reclaiming the throne that had been lost to him for years.

Finally, I almost cried out when I found a small bag of rice hidden behind some cobwebs and dirt—a feast from what I was used to. I began to wash it and prepare the rice while eating the shriveled carrot as I went. It wasn't even enough to consider a small snack, but it was something, and I was grateful for it, even as my stomach demanded more.

As I worked, my mind drifted to dreams of a better life, far removed from this dreary existence. I imagined myself living in a grand castle, surrounded by lush gardens and adorned with priceless art. I would wear beautiful gowns and dance the night away at elegant balls, my every need attended to by doting servants. Most of all, there would be books—so many books for me to read anytime I wanted.

That was why I'd taken the book Isla and Adrian. It was a fairytale, a woman who found love when she wasn’t looking for it, a woman who persevered and was the heroine with her mate by her side. It was a tale of two vampires different from what she knew of what vampires truly were—emotional. In my experience, they weren't loving, and they weren't the subjects appropriate for an epic love story. It was pure fantasy.

I'd had a life of comfort once upon a time. That past was fraught with threats and violence at every corner. Vampires were not gentle creatures and lacked the maternal—or, in my father's case, paternal—instincts needed to raise a child. The luxury wasn't worth the scars.

In my fantasy, I had it all, including a family who loved me. People who cared if I lived or died and who wanted the best for me. Something I'd never had before. Something, if I was being honest, I yearned for more than anything. It was too bad it was just a fairytale, and fairy tales weren’t real.

"Isabella!" Roderick barked, snapping me back to reality. "Stop daydreaming. I must go."

"Then go," I snapped through gritted teeth.

Fear lanced up me that he would hit me, and I muttered a quick apology. I didn't feel like being beaten again today. I couldn't help but wonder how different my life would be if I hadn't been born just a human. Would I have had the chance to fall in love and be swept off my feet by a man who would love me and treat me with kindness?

"Pathetic," Roderick sneered, taking a sip from a flask filled with blood he'd most likely procured recently. "You're as useless as your mother," Roderick spat. "Unlike me, she was a mere human peasant—I should never have polluted my noble bloodline by lying with her."

"Screw you," I muttered under my breath, earning a glare from Roderick that sent shivers down my spine. It was no small secret that whoever my mother had been, he'd hated her. All I knew of her was that Roderick hated her, and that was all I needed to know, in his opinion.

"Watch your tongue, girl," he warned me, his voice dark and dangerous. "Or I'll rip it out."

"Sorry, Father," I whispered, swallowing the lump in my throat. Though I really wasn't sorry. I knew better than to push him too far; I bore the scars of his wrath, both physical and emotional.

As I retreated to my corner of the shack, I allowed my mind to wander once more, seeking solace in my dreams. In my fantasies, I was strong and powerful, able to defend myself against any who sought to harm me. I was loved and cherished, free to explore the world and all its wonders without fear or judgment.

I could fly, and nothing held me back. Not hunger or the words spoken from Roderick's cruel lips or the abuse at the hands of many throughout my life. There, I was free.

"We mustn't stay in this town for too long, lest we be forced out." My father peered at me from the chair, worry pressing at the smooth, taut skin around his eyes—worry for himself, not me.

I stared into the dusty corners of the dirty hole-in-the-wall shack we called home and huddled in on myself to fight against the cold that seemed to always find its way in. I found myself thinking, not for the first time, what would happen if the people of this town learned who he was?

Me, I was nothing, just a bastard half-breed of noble blood. It mattered little. But him, well, they'd be interested in learning about him.

The kingship could still be claimed with him still in the land of the living. But one needed force to keep the throne in a land as viscous as its people. Over the years, we'd heard the lordships that survived were looking for him, ready to sever the line entirely and elect a new ruler. They could do neither without him.

He could do nothing without an army to support him. So we hid, I starved, and we waited. Him for a future that would never come to pass and me for freedom however it came to me. Gideon was not freedom but another prison of its own.

"Yes." I nodded reluctantly, shaking off the guilt of not being able to scrape together enough money for a decent meal. The carrots I'd found were shriveled, and the tiny rice seemed a far cry from a real meal; it was barely enough for a mouse. With the little money that remained, food was becoming a luxury, and soon, we would have nothing left at all. I had no means of providing for myself as he did.

My father frowned and pressed his lips together as if he wanted to say something before erasing all expressions of emotion and fixing his face into indifference. I stepped closer to the fireplace, trying to warm my hands, knowing that even when the moon rose high in the sky at the darkest hour of the night, they wouldn't feel any less numb. My breath appeared as a misty cloud, and I hastily added the last log to the burning fire, a spark igniting within.

"You should marry the mutt," Roderick announced after a long, impregnated silence.

He meant Gideon. He wanted to pawn me off to an alpha wolf who would eventually tear me down to shreds just to wipe his hands of me. I wasn't surprised. I was too tired to be angry anymore today.

I refused to meet his pale gray gaze when I said, "I won't marry him."

I turned my head from the fire to meet his now, once again, expanded red-rimmed black pupils. I knew my father had once cared for me, not like other fathers cared about their daughters. He cared about his things. That’s what I was to him, a thing.

He cared enough that I lived, ate occasionally, and was warm. The affection that should have been evident was stolen from him when the sorceress cursed the vampire kingdom with her heartless spell. His

brother, the king, had been ripped to pieces before my eyes. He hadn’t been there.

“Isabella,” Roderick called out again firmly.

“I can’t marry him. I won’t!” I said with more force, shifting my feet closer to him. The smell of damp soil and a hint of bitterness lingered in the air around us, of darkness and deep places. He let out a tired sigh.

“You had better figure something out soon, girl. Or your only other option is to be made,” he announced like a loud bang throughout the small room.

An uncomfortable silence descended upon us. I dared not speak and very nearly dared not breathe. If there was anything I didn't want in the world, becoming a vampire was it.

"I apologize, Father. I was…daydreaming," I mumbled, shifting my feet closer to him.

He let out a tired sigh. "Try not to die through the night. I must be off."

Hunting, he meant. I shook my head, returning my gaze to the small fire, its faint light barely illuminating the small space we had called home since winter had started. A few logs remained on the dying flames, just enough for me to lay down on my bare pallet and drift off into a restless sleep.

Dreaming impossible dreams such as that, somehow, I'd find a way to escape this wretched life and be free, proving to everyone—including myself—that I was more than just a cursed half-breed.

Until then, I held onto my dreams fiercely, knowing they kept me from drowning in despair. Falling into a hungered sleep, I hoped to get lucky and not wake up this time.

I was never lucky.

CHAPTER 3

Bella

I awoke to the arctic chill that seeped into my bones, numbing my fingers and turning my teeth to chatterboxes. Searching for warmth, I stumbled across the cold room; all I found was a fierce wind blowing through from an open door, bringing a chill far too cold for this time of year.

Squeezing my body together in an attempt to conserve heat, my eyes were drawn to the slumped figure of my father in the corner. Blood-soaked clothes clung tightly to his body and stained his chin while his mouth hung open, exposing sharp incisors that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

My father, the mighty prince of the vampire kingdom, Roderick Val' Draco, once a proud and handsome prince, had fallen so far to the bottom. We were everything he despised.

My body shivered as I shuffled closer to him, examining his motionless figure. My heart sank as I watched the stillness of his chest, not a single breath leaving his mouth while mine puffed out white clouds of vapor with each exhale. He had drunk far too much this time, leaving me alone in the cold.

I leaned closer and sniffed him, smelling the intoxicating aroma of the blood on and in him. He'd been to the ale house and the drug den. Sampling from both, letting the drugs and alcohol inhibit him as it did the warm bodies he fed from.

He awoke suddenly, his gaze emotionless and void of any humanity. He clasped his grip tightly around my neck, and I fought back with all the force I could muster. His eyes were full-blown black, piercing into me like they couldn't recognize or see me. I strained to break free, pushing and clawing at him in desperate attempts to get a single breath of air.

"Father! Wake up!" I cried out, trying to break the spell he was under. I tried to slap him across the face, hoping it would bring him back to reality, but instead, he threw me across the room. I whimpered in pain as my body struck the unforgiving wall. Despite the agony, I quickly stood and readied myself for whatever conflict was to come. All while cursing at my skirts that entangled my legs.

He lunged toward me in a flash and propelled me back with his powerful fists. With all the strength I had left in me, I retaliated, hammering my fist into his face with a deafening roar that filled the room. "Wake up, you bastard!" I snarled as his eyes slowly started to regain focus on me.

"Isabella?" he asked, shock evident on his face. His eyes darkened as if he were unconcerned. He stepped back cautiously.

"Stay away from me," I hissed. Rage surged through my veins at my own foolishness; I knew this would happen, yet somehow, I had deluded myself into believing I was free of danger with him, of all people.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said indifferently, as if he may not have meant to but wasn't concerned that he had.

I continued in a low growl, "Sure you didn't." I searched the room for my dagger. I had been so careless; it was why I was furious. I had been raised around vampires and knew how dangerous they could be.

"If you just took up your birthright, then you wouldn't have to struggle or be hungry," he said, trying to make me see his point of view.

"But then I would never feel the sun on my skin again." I narrowed my eyes with a defiant stare. "Never. I'd rather starve than become one of you," I spat. My voice became softer and tired as the words came out low and weak. "I'd rather grow old and die a mortal than become a monster like you."

His lips curled in response, and he spat, "You are not worthy of our bloodline. We are royalty, unlike this poor dwelling. I was meant to rule a kingdom."

My thoughts were full of mockery and scorn as I looked around the dilapidated shack. "Royalty, indeed! Of what?" I extended my arms searching around as if looking for the fucking royalty he wore like a badge of honor. "We have nothing to be regal with or for. You are living in a delusion. How much farther can we fall?"

"Get out," he demanded. His gaze returned to full obsidian, and his growls became more primal and animalistic.

"Your regret will come too late this time and when you beg my forgiveness as you always do… there will be none," I promised as I narrowed my gaze. I swept past him, giving him my back. Also an insult to a vampire.

His snarl deepened as his hand shot out like lightning, but I was faster than his reflexes, which had been dulled by bloodlust and drugs. I kicked him back with a powerful thrust, the force of which sent shockwaves through the room. Then, remembering my dagger, I snatched it up and threw it straight into his carotid artery, severing it. He dropped to the ground with a gurgle as his lifeblood escaped him.

I pulled my dagger free of his limp form, knowing I didn’t have long before he regained awareness. I grabbed my bloodied book before grabbing my threadbare cloak and opening the door. The light had left his eyes, and he would soon be awake, bloodthirsty, and ready to hunt me down. So I ran without looking back.

Into the bitter cold, dark night.

I pressed myself against the cold stone wall, listening for any sign that my father was coming after me. Fear and anger coursed through my veins like fire, stoking my determination to escape this wretched place. Though I appeared more human than vampire, I had some advantages with my enhanced night vision, hearing, and strength. They wouldn't do me any good against a supernatural creature, but a girl had to hope for the best and prepare for the worst.

My muscles seized up as I huddled into my cloak. I'd been smart enough to grab it on the way out, but it was still damp from the rain and had turned to ice overnight, leaving me little protection from the elements. If I didn't find shelter soon, I'd be in a world of pain.

"Damn him," I muttered under my breath, my resolve hardening. I loved to read, escaping into worlds where I wasn't abused and blamed for my family's issues. Tonight, I would forge my own story.

A sudden, guttural rumble sent shivers down my spine as I slipped into the shadows. Gideon stepped out from behind a corner, his amber eyes blazing with possessive desire.

"Isabella!" Gideon's animalistic snarl cut through the silence, sending shivers down my spine. I knew he was using his wolf senses to track me, and I cursed my inability to escape him. My heart raced, and fear gripped me like a vise.

"You are mine," he claimed, stalking toward me.

He barked with a carnal hunger that shook me to my core. Dread hit me hard in the gut. His hands moved to caress my legs, encircling them around his waist. I pushed at his chest, but he was immovable, pressing his bare arousal against the fabric of my clothing, mere inches separating us from complete intimacy.

This was it. I was screwed. Gideon would take me, claim me, and never let me go. I'd never be his wife or equal, but the creature that warmed his bed. I would rather become the one thing I swore I would never become, a full vampire, before I ever became his slave. Only one desperate thought gave me the power to fight back.

He leaned in close, running his teeth across the skin of my throat and breathing me in, his teeth skimming my skin, posed to clamp down. I bit my lip to keep the whimper from escaping as he crushed me harder. His scent filled with a heady thickness, dripping with desire. I calmed my erratic breathing, knowing my fear would only increase his need to have me, to bite me.

To claim me.

I felt myself losing control, my calm slipping away as I realized I couldn't hold it. I felt my pulse begin to thunder in my ears, hearing it like a drumbeat. The desire to move, to do something, anything, flared intensely as my urge to flee grew stronger, conflicting with my urge to fight.

"Leave me alone, you bastard!" I screamed into the shadows, tears of frustration and anger streaming down my face.

"You are mine," he repeated like a broken record, this time putting the force of his alpha power in it. I felt my knees tremble and threaten to give out, but I locked them and stood stock straight, refusing to submit.

"Never, Gideon," I replied defiantly, trying to sound braver than I felt. "I won't be your plaything."

"Is that so?" he challenged, lunging toward me with supernatural speed. I fought to evade him, but his strong arms encircled my waist, pulling me against the rough stone wall.

I cursed and stumbled back as my body hit the brick of a building, its rough surface scraping against my exposed skin.

Gideon pinned me in place with his muscular arms, trapping me between him and the building. He bent closer, inhaling my scent with a sharp grunt. His gaze burned into my brown-flecked amber eyes as his wolf lingered beneath the surface.

"Get off me!" I shouted, struggling to break free.

Gideon's grip tightened, and for a moment, fear consumed me. The fire within me still burned, and I used it to fuel my actions.

"I'm going to bite you and fuck you in that order." He hissed against my skin before his teeth sunk savagely into the flesh just above my collarbone.

Red-hot rage boiled through my veins, and I kneed him so hard in the groin that he released his bite with a grunt. Without another thought, I pulled out my dagger and plunged it deep into his side. His amber eyes widened in shock as the trickle of blood seeped from the side of his mouth. The injured wolf growled possessively, "You are mine," before collapsing into the mud at my feet.

He would live, unfortunately.

I quickly searched for somewhere safe to hide before sprinting into the night. Howling wolves soon echoed around me, taunting me as I raced toward the forbidden woods. My only chance of survival lay ahead, but could I make it there before Gideon was back up?

I bolted down the alleyway, tears streaming down my face. In my haste, I knocked over a stack of empty crates, causing a loud crash that echoed through the night. I didn't dare look back to see if my pursuers had heard.

Gideon's enraged roar told me he was hot on my trail. I poured all my energy into my burning legs, sprinting for the forbidden forest.

Just as the trees came into view, a heavy weight slammed into me from behind. I crashed to the ground, all the air forced from my lungs. Struggling to breathe, I flipped over to find Gideon's hulking form above me, his eyes flashing amber with fury.

I clawed desperately at the ground, my fingers grazing a jagged rock. With a desperate prayer, I smashed it against Gideon's temple. He howled in pain and loosened his grip just enough for me to wriggle free.

I didn't look back this time as I raced for the shadowy forest, weaving between trees until his roars faded into the distance. Gasping for breath, I allowed myself a moment to grieve the loss of my weak mortal life. There was no going back now toward either my salvation or my brutal end. I ran into the dark and foreboding woods that bordered the village's south side.

The woods where the newspaper article said bodies had been found. The woods everyone knew never to go into. I hoped the fact no one went in there would give me some saving grace. If I swallowed my fear, I could use it to my advantage.

My heart hammered in my chest, and I knew Gideon would not let me go without a fight. I refused to be claimed by him or anyone else.

I'm not their possession, I thought fiercely, stumbling over roots and rocks as I plunged deeper into the forest. *I'm my own person, and I will fight for my freedom, even if it kills me.*

Which seemed likely.

The shadows closed around me, swallowing me whole as I fled, with Gideon's enraged howls echoing through the night behind me. The journey ahead would be treacherous, but one thing was clear: I would never stop running. Whatever it took, I would find a way to forge my own path.

CHAPTER 4

Bella

The icy gale ripped through my hair, howling a deafening tone that rattled my bones. I pressed my chattering teeth tightly together as the smell of pine and the sharpness of frost invaded my senses. Even this late into the night, the shifters were enjoying the last vestiges of the night. I glanced up into the sky, squinting at the pale sliver of the moon concealed behind clouds that hugged it in a winter's embrace. The slightest of outlines could be seen to prove it was full.

The curse of the woods was so powerful this night that it almost felt alive as snow began to fall, growing heavier with each step I took. I could taste the magic in the air, a thick feeling of dread that warned me to turn back or suffer the consequences. Still, I pushed forward, desperate and determined to outrun my fate. My feet were rooted to the ground, unable to move past the invisible barrier despite the ever-present desperation that drove me further into the darkness.

Driven by sheer desperation, I scrambled up a steep incline, jagged rocks slicing into my palms. The pain only fueled me, driving me further into the woods, away from the monster who sought to claim me.

As I reached the top of the hill, my foot caught on a hidden root, sending me tumbling to the ground. I cried out in pain as my body collided with the earth, fresh wounds blossoming across my skin. I tried to pick myself up, but my battered limbs refused to obey.

Gideon's treacherous plans hung heavy in my mind, serving as an inconsolable reminder that I never truly belonged here amongst these

monsters—ones who twisted love and commitment into nothing but depravity and slavery.

They treated women like objects and used them for their own gain until they were exhausted and discarded like yesterday's trash. My heart ached at this injustice, thanking God each day that He had given me the gift of being born mortal. This curse would not have me.

At least vampires had the decency not to toy with people's lives just for sport.

I was determined not to let Gideon, who had forced his claim on me, find and use me however he pleased. The air around me seemed to be changing, almost as if warning me to stop, but I ignored it and forged ahead.

I had underestimated the wolves so determined to run me to the ground. Their growls reverberated through the forest, a new tone added as they barked viciously at me. One deeper, louder, more guttural, and primal. The sound had my back threatening to bend and me falling to my knees, giving the wolves the advantage as they gained on me. They surrounded me. Gideon's pale blond wolf was still covered in blood as he snapped his jaws angrily at me. I pulled out my dagger and waited.

My heart raced as the wolf lunged toward me, ready to tear out my throat. With every ounce of strength I had left, I shifted sideways, desperately trying to dodge its attack. Only to realize too late that my legs were numb from the cold, leaving them useless and dead weight. I knew I was dead, but I'd go down fighting. His wolf lunged, and I shifted sideways, stumbling as the cold numbed me into nothing more than dead-weight appendages as I barely was able to miss getting my throat torn out.

Gideon growled, stalking toward me like a predator closing in on its prey. His eyes blazed with triumph and something darker—something that made my blood run cold.

"Stay away from me!" I spat defiantly, even as my body trembled with exhaustion. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing me submit.

"Give up, Isabella," he sneered. "You belong to me."

"I belong to no one," I pronounced, but my voice trembled.

Suddenly, a mysterious mist enveloped the area, thickening the darkness around us. Panic surged through me, and I couldn't tell if it was a blessing or a curse. The mist wrapped around us like a cocoon, choking off Gideon's barred fangs as he loomed over me.

"Isabella—" His voice was suddenly muffled as though spoken from a great distance away.

I lunged at the wolf, his pack mates baring their razor-sharp teeth and snarling menacingly in my direction. Gideon pounced, snatching my clothing tight in his razor-sharp teeth. The sudden movement caused me to stagger back in terror. Something whipped out of the darkness, large and menacing, and even Gideon seemed lost as he frantically searched for its source.

My vision blurred, and an overwhelming fatigue washed over me. I struggled to stay awake, but the darkness beckoned, offering sweet oblivion. A roar sounded in my ears. Both wolf and one that sounded much bigger.

The wolves began whining as they took off into the woods, leaving me to death.

I pushed on, stumbling farther into the woods. My head swam as dizziness took over. I was not going to make it very far. The damn mist was everywhere, too thick to see through.

A putrid smell of burning filled the air as a monstrous figure descended from the heavens and thundered against the ground with such force that I was sent hurtling through the air and into a nearby tree. As my vision faded, I saw droplets of snow turn crimson-like blood before darkness claimed me.

I awoke to the inky blackness of the night. The last thing I remembered was the mist enveloping me as I ran through the forest, and now I found myself in a strange stone room. Fear seized me as I realized I was sitting against a cold wall. As my gaze traveled, I realized it wasn't a room.

The forest had been replaced by an expansive cavern illuminated by flickering torchlight. My heart hammered in my chest as my eyes locked onto the massive crimson dragon that dominated the space. His scales caught flickers of moonlight from above as they glimmered off his iridescent scales.

My eyes trailed along his body, mesmerized by the beauty of him. He was the promise of death, and he was magnificent. I knew I should be terrified of him, but I couldn't muster the strength.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I made out a stone wall behind me and an open doorway leading to a vast hall. Light streamed down from a domed ceiling hole, revealing a dirty wooden floor with designs etched into the stone walls. A small fire had been built outside the doorway, providing warmth and light. Stale air scented by wood smoke filled the space.

My heart pounded as adrenaline rushed through me, making it hard to draw breath in. Fear gripped me as I stumbled back until I remembered the wall behind me.

"Hello," I called out.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up straight. The dragon's two red glowing eyes stared back at me. I squinted, wondering about my own sanity. Was this death, and I was stuck in some sort of dark in between? Panic hit me, clawing up my chest as I whimpered. The real panic didn't start until those glowing crimson eyes moved closer from the distance, and a cool breeze that smelled like brimstone tickled my nose.

His body looked like a reptile, nearly two meters long and covered in scales. The lines of his face were fluid as he shifted from one state to another: angry snarl and baring teeth, all watching me, assessing me.

"Well," I said, "shit. This is just my luck."

I didn't know much about dragons, except they were territorial, possessive, aggressive, and mostly extinct. Actually, they had been extinct for centuries now. I was sure of it. Yet, here was a dragon, looming far too close for my comfort.

His body was long and scaled, his large talons clicking on the stone surface, but his wings held my attention the most. They were obsidian and crimson, like his scales and the darkest nights painted with blood. If there was any light in the darkness, his massive wings blotted it out of existence. I was thankful for the small amount of torchlight provided. At least I'd see what killed me in its razor-sharp jaws.

He growled, and I felt my back pressed tightly, flush with the wall, even as my gaze did not budge from the blood-red eyes that held my own.

I lowered my voice, hoping it was gentle and calm. "Listen, I don't know how I ended up here." I lifted my hands to create a barrier before

me, speaking low and steady. "But I did not intend to end up here and am very happy to leave."

The dragon shuffled even closer, stepping completely over the massive pit between us until his face was inches from mine. Then he looked deep into my eyes like he could see everything in my soul. He roared again, a low sound that vibrated through the room and weighed down my movement to a derisory crawl.

"I know I may appear to be quite appetizing," I said cautiously. "But trust me, I am not. In fact, I have been told many times that my blood is… unpleasant to consume." I stumbled over the words, remembering all of the times vampires had taken a bite out of me only to spit my blood back out in revulsion. "Lucky, indeed…" I muttered in disbelief.

The dragon ignored me, opening its mouth and showing off its elongated teeth as the fire within him began to burn, ready to be unleashed. I'd always known I'd go out in a blaze of glory. Just not this literally.

I turned my head like a coward. If it had been anything but flame that would end me, I'd stare it in the eye and face it. The fear of the pain, as I burned in a fury of dragon fire, lanced fear in every fiber of my body that left me trembling. I closed my eyes tight and turned my head, waiting for death to welcome me in a burning rage.

Nothing happened. Finally, I opened one eye as the dragon stood there, waiting. His fire banked, and the acrid stench of fire permeated the air as if he had thought better of burning me to a bloody pulp. Or he had just wanted to scare me. If it was the latter, it had worked. I straightened my back, squared my shoulders, and reminded myself that death was but another journey and that I should be brave in the face of it.

Which was utter bullshit. Dead was dead; there was nothing brave in it, only an ending. I read in a book that if you said positive, wise statements to yourself, you had a better chance of believing them. I was still waiting for it to work.

"Well go on then," I spat. "Might as well finish." My hands clenched, but I kept my feet planted as I stared into the vertical red pupils of the monstrous beast. A challenge in my stare. The arms at my sides tensed as the trembling was barely contained.

The dragon snorted, permeating the air with a sweet, burning scent. He leaned close to me, bumping his scaled hide against my skin, and breathed

in deeply. Before I could react, he stepped back, turned, and flew away into the opening, where the stars glittered into the darkened pit far above.

As soon as he was out of sight. I let a loud exhale out and fell to my knees. My head tilted back as I thanked the goddesses for yet another day, grateful I hadn't pissed myself in fear.

CHAPTER 5

Bella

The cave surrounded me, its rough walls slick with moisture and glistening like the obsidian scales of a snake. As I cautiously stepped into the darkness, the damp floor squelched beneath my boots. Deep crevices branched off from the main chamber, whispering their secrets to the shadows that lurked within. The air was cool and heavy with an earthy scent, sending a chill down my spine. I wrapped my arms around myself for warmth and comfort, though I knew there would be little to be found in this place.

After years of being numb from cold and starving, there were worse fates. I would survive this. I hoped.

Heavy footsteps echoed through the chamber, and I blinked against the dim light. As the light of day began to crest far above me, a man appeared from the tunnel across from me. I scrambled to my feet, shivering as puffs of white air escaped my lips. He stared at me for a long moment, raging over my body before meeting my eyes.

He was beautiful in a classical sense. From what I could make out across the expanse, his features were symmetrical, and his body was honed with lean muscle that spoke of the hours of training he had to do to maintain it. When the sun hit his body, I could tell his hair was a dark shade of auburn, almost brown, until the light caught the soft strands. It shimmered in the same shades as the scales of the dragon that now haunted my waking dreams.

"Who are you and why am I here?" I demanded, stomping closer but careful not to topple over the ledge.

The man said nothing, grabbing a rope knotted at the end and looped for a foothold. He swung it toward me, grunting in disapproval when I failed to grab it. As it turned back, he leaned over, snatching it with a frown. "Grab the rope," he demanded in a deep, gruff voice, swinging my way harder.

I leaned dangerously over the ledge, snatching it up and considering my options: freeze on this ledge or go with the grumpy, attractive man.

The man's scowl deepened. "I'll be asking the questions. Who are you, and why have you trespassed onto my lands?" His voice was deep and commanding, with a strange, foreign, almost ancient-sounding lilt to his words.

I seriously considered staying as I let the rope swing back his way, and he snatched it back up, lifting an eyebrow at me in warning. I crossed my arms and pressed my lips together, shooting a glare his way. "Your lands?" I shot back. "I was running for my life and ended up here by accident."

He moved closer to the edge, his imposing frame towering over me even from a distance. I refused to let him intimidate me, glaring defiantly into his piercing cerulean eyes. I held his stare as I tilted my head up.

"I don't believe you," he growled. "You reek of death and deception. I know a vampire when I smell one."

My eyes widened in shock. How could he tell?

"Half vampire," I corrected through gritted teeth. "And I'm telling the truth—I stumbled here while fleeing the alpha's wolves."

The man said nothing, merely swinging the rope to me again, his eyes daring me not to take it as if this were the last time he'd offer. There was a challenge in the depths of his blue eyes that told me he would leave me. So, with a huff, I snatched the rope back, my arms dropping to reach out and take it, forcing me to stumble forward.

I planted my foot on the rope and swung with it as my body went over the chasm separating me from freedom. A yelp escaped my mouth as I forced myself not to look down. The man grabbed my body and held the rope as I dropped off the rope onto my knees once again. This time, kneeling in front of a stranger.

I quickly jumped up and stumbled back close to the ledge, my body tipping over. A scream built in my throat, and the man grabbed my hand,

pulling me back up. My heart picked up speed as I knew the plummet would be long and the impact painful.

Still, I didn't piss myself. I stood plastered to this man's chest before he carefully pulled me away from the ledge and down the tunnel.

The man leaned down, inhaling deeply as his eyes roamed my face. My traitorous heart quickened at his sudden proximity, at the heat that seemed to radiate from his broad chest.

"Lies," he hissed. "You were sent here as a spy for the bloodsuckers."

"I don't even know where 'here' is!" I yelled in exasperation. "Now let me go, you arrogant brute!"

A flicker of amusement crossed the man's stoic features. "Arrogant brute? You have spirit, I'll give you that. But you're not going anywhere until I have the truth."

I blew an exasperated breath out. "You want the truth? I'm running for my life from shifters and vampires alike. All I want is somewhere safe to hide, not to be imprisoned by an egomaniac!"

The man's eyes bored into mine, flashing with anger... and something more. The torchlight danced across his chiseled face as he considered my words. Finally, he turned abruptly and strode away.

"We're not done here," he called over his shoulder before disappearing into the shadows.

He left me alone and fuming, my heart racing from the strange exhilaration of our confrontation. I rushed forward so that I could see his back once again, my legs moving fast to keep up with his long stride.

"Who are you?" I demanded, grabbing his arm to stop him as we walked swiftly down the darkened tunnel. My dear old dad's lineage gave me above-average night vision, but he couldn't know that. He ignored me, plowing forward without a glance back. I hurried to catch up.

Finally, we exited the tunnel into the bright light of the day, and my hand shot up to shield my eyes from the blinding light. I started to look around for an escape. We were in what looked like a courtyard, the tunnel opening up. In the distance was an actual castle, and we trotted toward it at maximum speed. My dress tangled in my legs as I tried to keep up. Finally, I lifted my skirt and jogged after the man.

"Wait!" I called out to his retreating form.

The castle nestled in the distance ascended fast, and I was soon rushing up the steps toward him and the massive front door. I reached out to grab

his arm. Why, I didn't know. I knew I should be running away from him, not toward him. I also knew what awaited me out there. My best chance was here. I wanted to figure out this place, this man, his dragon, and how he had saved me. Not out there where only death and worse awaited me.

As my fingers grasped his overly warm, muscled arm, the man went instantly still, and I slammed into the back of him. A low snarl emanated from his lips, making my blood run cold.

"Get your hands off me." He growled low as it rumbled menacingly from deep within his chest.

Before I knew it, he grabbed me fast and hard, pulling me inside the house. He pushed my back hard against the thick wood of the door and towered over me. His skin was too close. I felt the burning warmth like a caress on my skin.

I knew my heart was pounding wildly, and in case he might be a shifter or other supernatural creature, I forced the fear down with a swallow and took deep breaths before lifting my chin and meeting his stormy blue gaze. Dark auburn tendrils of long hair fell over his face from the tie holding most of it back.

He wasn't devastatingly handsome or even ethereal like the fae and vampires. No, he was rugged in a way that you couldn't deny he was a man. His jaw could cut glass, and his high cheekbones pointed toward a full, sensuous mouth. His nose was thin and a shade too large in profile. He was handsome, but his presence made him so much more. It was commanding and purely masculine.

He leaned in to sniff me, his jaw scraping against my cheek as the rough hair felt like sandpaper. His hot breath along my neck and ear sent gooseflesh down my body and heat in my core. I stood still, unsure what to do, before he pulled back and glared at me through long, dark lashes over moonlighters.

"Death clings to your skin like a poison." His lips curled, and I shoved him back hard, flashing my teeth like a vampire. Only no elongated canines appeared.

"Yeah, you mentioned that earlier. And you look like an idiot," I snarled back.

A ghost of a smile tipped the edges of his lips, and his eyes crinkled briefly before the expression vanished. "I can't argue with that," he

deadpanned before turning and walking away, deeper into the castle while leaving me to stare after him.

It was then I looked around the room. Various odds and ends were scattered to and fro. Stacked furniture was pushed into a corner that seemingly didn't belong in the space. What couldn't be denied was the opulence of the castle. There was gold everywhere—gold-lined paneling and wainscoting.

Gold frames, golden objects of art, gold trimmed and yet dusty crystal chandeliers, and the castle's foyer opened up to a large room that I now took in. It was massive, like a ballroom. Two large staircases branched off on the sides until they converged together in the middle, disappearing into the top level, leaving an open landing for those above to look down onto the floor below.

The ceiling was made of gold and colored glass tiles as the morning sun hit it, creating a light prism that highlighted the whole room. Catching the dust particles in the air, including the massive amount of odd dusty objects and furniture that seemed abandoned on the floor.

It was then the man turned, looking me up and down, and his cold blue eyes softened as he noted the scrapes and nicks found all over my body. The ill-fitting shoes and the general state of my decimated body. He reached for my hands, and I flinched, snatching them back suddenly.

"Let me see," he asked, holding my stare. "Please."

He gently took my hands and examined the cuts I'd received from brambles and thorns while running in the forest. He shook his head at the damage as he examined my injured body.

We were deep into the castle, and he led me by gently taking my hands into his as if afraid he would hurt me. His words and actions were so contradictory that they made my head swim, so I focused on anything but him.

I felt hyper-aware of his presence—of the way his body was close to mine and the way my heart sped up as he leaned closer. For the briefest of moments, I thought maybe he was just as affected by my presence as I was by his until he pulled back, and his face bore no change, only cold calculation.

"You should be fine, but we should wash the scratches as soon as possible," he said before stepping away. The lack of heat made me chillier, so I examined the castle again to calm my nerves.

The castle was beautiful and extravagant yet had the air of a tomb. I made my way through the furniture and objects scattered around, dust-covered, to the ajar door. I moved toward it, further distancing myself from the man who seemed both cold yet had such a caring touch. Peeking in tentatively, I pushed open the door, and the man followed.

We stopped in front of a long table, where the man pulled out water and bandages, cleaning and wrapping my cut-up hands. He was still gentle in his administration even though his gaze was laser-focused on the task.

"There," he whispered. "Now you won't die from infection before you leave." He stood abruptly, leaving me to jump up and follow.

"I have nowhere to go," I admitted, hoping that the tiny kernel of compassion I'd seen would be enough for him to grant me temporary sanctuary.

"Not my problem, though it doesn't matter anyway," the man barked. The room was much darker, as the window to the space was covered in a thick velvet curtain tied together to keep out the morning light. I dragged my feet forward and found him sitting on steps leading up to what looked like a dais—only it was empty.

No, not empty, at least not entirely. On the matching throne chairs were what looked to be pieces of porcelain shattered and arranged lovingly as if they could be pieced back together and made whole again. The man stood before them, his back to me.

Even in the dim light, I could see the tension, the thick lines of corded muscle that formed up his back as his hands clenched and unclenched the closer I moved to him.

"I'm sorry. I can't just leave. I need help," I said with more anger than I'd intended. "There are men after me. Men who wish to hurt me."

The man growled again, the sound inhuman. If I'd had doubts about his species before, they were confirmed then. He was a shifter. What type remained to be seen. The dragon from earlier was my best guess.

This entire situation was beyond weird, from the magic surrounding the property that made me sick in the woods to the furniture piled high and scattered through the castle—and now two thrones with broken porcelain. I was beginning to believe the creature before me had lost his mind in the worst way.

The shattered porcelain on the twin thrones seemed arranged in a deliberate pattern, and a chill went down my spine. It was as if their very

souls were fractured and trapped here, unable to move on. What dark magic could accomplish such a terrible fate?

"Why are you still here?" His deep voice cut through the silence, forcing me to jump.

I inspected him momentarily, my gaze flicking back to the throne. "They are cursed, aren't they?" I asked, moving forward.

Only for him to round on me, forcing me to step back quickly before I lost my footing and stumbled backward. Pain flickered across his handsome features before he quickly stamped it down, his face turning into a mask of hardness. He expected fear, but I was used to being treated like shit by men.

Instead, I crossed my arms and glared. My early inspection continued as I noticed his clothing, while finely made, was very much out of date. He wore a long, embroidered tunic and a belt. Then beneath it were tight, form-fitting pants with tall, worn leather boots on his large feet. He had the body of a warrior used to battling with a sword. I knew just by a sniff that he held daggers on his person. The steel was sharp and metallic in the air. Despite that, he had forgone a sword. Those large hands were weapons enough.

He must have thought I wasn't a threat, and I supposed to him, I wasn't.

"Yes, they are cursed. So am I," he said through gritted teeth. As if it hurt him to admit it.

"Who cursed you?" I asked, squaring my shoulders as I felt the air spark at an oncoming fight.

He barreled toward me, his hulking, towering form pushing me further back until I felt the hard bite of the wall at my back. "Your people did," he spat. His face invaded my space, inches from mine.

My hands went up to protect myself, pushing against his chest. His muscles were tense beneath my fingers.

"My people?" I inquired while trying to push him away to no avail. I was weak, even with half-vampire blood running through my veins. I was nothing compared to him.

"I can smell death clinging to your skin. You belong to the moon, or at least you serve them." He leaned in, breathing in deeply. "Yet, there is something else. Something otherworldly. Why is a creature of the moon here? Did she send it to you?" he growled, pushing me further against the wall until there wasn't any space to breathe.

"Get off me, you creep!" I shouted, the sound echoing off the chamber. I felt my hands ball into fists as I pushed against him, feeling the swift rise of my heartbeat. I thought of the last time I'd been in a similar position, helpless against a man.

I knew my eyes had widened, and for a moment, I thought I saw regret in his gaze as he released me just enough that I could push him back a half step. I knew he'd allowed that, and my puny strength had been nothing.

He wasn't human, but I wasn't entirely sure what he was. Whatever he was, he was powerful. His aura alone brushed up against my skin, and it was intoxicating.

"Make me." He leaned over and growled in my ear, his hot breath warm. Which did funny things to me even though he was a stranger.

He had me against the wall, and he was threatening me. Yet, it was different somehow from Gideon. I had the distinct feeling that although he intentionally intimidated me, he'd never cross the line. My heart sped up, and I felt the warmth in his body. The intoxicating scent of firewood and cedar did odd things to me as a warmth spread deep in my center. I licked my lips.

He smirked as if he had read my reaction. The smug bastard merely smirked. I pressed my teeth together, my muscles tense, and my fists tightened as I felt the anger wash over me.

I kneed him in the balls, and he folded over. I kneed him in the face. "Don't you ever threaten me again!" I screamed in rage, feeling angrier at my reaction to him than what he'd done to me. I was used to alphas and men manhandling, threatening, and abusing me. I was done with it. Done with being weak and at the mercy of others.

I heard the laughter and the chuckle that sounded across the room. "Well then, Lore. You sure know how to pick up the ladies," someone with a thick accent said. It was one I couldn't place.

I turned to see another man, not as big as the redhead, who was now standing up to glare at me. He was broader in his shoulders but a few inches shorter. His hair was a shade of blond that seemed to shimmer bright in the sunlight but darkened as he stepped into the darkened room and away from the tall stained-glass windows. He wasn't nearly as handsome, either. The man called Lore had a rugged kind of attractiveness that made women swoon. Not pretty, but manly. This man looked ready to spend the night in the elements and live in a cabin all his days. Wildness

was in his appearance; his hair was long, messy, and unkempt as if the forest had long since claimed him as her own.

Moments later, a busty pale-haired woman and her young boy barreled behind him through a door just past the man.

"Stay out of it, Alastair," the one called Lore spat toward the blond man, his eyes narrowing on him.

If the man called Alastair didn't hold an amused grin, I'd have thought them enemies. But he merely stood as if desperately trying not to laugh. Leaving me even more confused.

"Is it true?" the boy asked, the same shade of pale blond on his head as his bright green gaze shot to mine. "There's a lady here?" He smiled a toothy grin, one of his teeth missing.

The busty, plump, petite blond woman grabbed him, stopping him from barreling forward.

"She just got here, unfortunately," Lore, my assailant, muttered as he turned toward the odd bunch behind him. They, too, were dressed in outdated clothing, less refined than the man they'd called Lore.

"Your name is Lore?" I asked, changing my tone. I wasn't ready to leave. I knew if I did, the pack would find me and either tear me to shreds or pass me along as their personal whore. Neither sounded particularly pleasing.

"You simpleton," the woman said, a look of disapproval on her face as eyebrows furrowed. "Introduce yourself to the lady."

Lore had the good sense to look guilty at her tone and hard stare as if caught with his hand in the cookie jar. The thought of cookies made my stomach embarrassingly grumble so loud it, too, echoed through the room. I was mortified, but the woman's gaze softened, and she stepped forward.

"Oh, you poor thing. Come with me, and we'll get you some food."

I hesitated despite her kind face and soft words. I wasn't used to kindness, and my first instinct was not to trust it. So many times in the past, kindness had been twisted to ugliness in a split second. After standing there awkwardly deliberating over the risk of following her, the aching hunger in my belly won out. I nodded but stopped as a big, callused hand reached out to stop me.

"I'm Lore MacCain. Welcome to my home. You're not welcome, not really. So don't get comfortable." His overly warm arm barred the way to the woman who now stared at him with little patience and a thinned

expression that irate women far too often gave when they were being pushed too far.

"Fucking alpha prick," I muttered under my breath.

A ghost of a smile flitted across Lore's lips before he released me. “Don’t let Alysha hear you using those types of words. She’ll wash your mouth out with soap. Actually, it’d be funny to watch. So be my guest.”

I sneered at him, baring my teeth. “I’d like to see her try.”

I turned and left him in the tomb of a once-upon-a-time throne room. The promise of food lifted the deep ache of long-time hunger in its promise for the barest of moments.

CHAPTER 6

Bella

As I stepped inside, the kitchen door creaked open, a symphony of old hinges and drafty corridors. A warm gust of air, thick with the scent of baking bread and simmering stew, enveloped me like an embrace. I blinked against the sudden brightness, adjusting my eyes to the glow of the hearth fire flickering in the dimly lit room.

Alysha brushed past me to stir a steaming pot of something that made my mouth water. Her blond hair was pulled back into a loose bun, framing her kind face, unlike mine. Beside her, the young boy leaned over to smell the contents with a toothy grin that was missing a front tooth. His pale blond hair caught the light from the open window in the morning sun. A smudge of flour dusted his cheek as he turned to grab bowls and spoons before thrusting one in my hand with a shy tentativeness that had me grinning back at him.

"Cut that out, Billy, and wait for our guest," Alysha chastised the boy before turning her kind eyes to me. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Um, yes, I am," I replied hesitantly, my stomach growling loudly at the tantalizing scents surrounding me. "Is this your kitchen?"

"It is now," Alysha said, smiling warmly before pointing toward a chair. "Please, make yourself comfortable and have something to eat. I thought you might be hungry."

"You've been expecting me?" I asked as I studied her, unsure how or why this woman would expect me for anything.

"My..." she trailed off as if considering her words carefully. "My Lord Lore informed us of your arrival."

"You mean when the dragon snatched me up and dropped me in a cave?" I said more than asked in a clipped tone.

Alysha stared at me for a long moment, then sighed and nodded. "Yes, I'm very sorry that you had to go through that. He..." She trailed off again as she turned her attention to what appeared to be a stew, steam wafting up from the boiling pot. "He can be a little overly protective sometimes. He shouldn't have thrown you on the cave ledge like that."

"Left me there all night in the cold, too."

"Yes and left you in the cold." She exhaled with a sigh. "He's more beast than anything these days."

I considered her words, wondering not for the first time what she meant. How could he be a beast? Dragons had long since been gone from the lands, and dragon shifters were rare and extinct.

They were also dangerous, the mortal enemy of my father's people. The reason the war between the sun and the moon had started so long ago, leading to us being mortal enemies. If Lore was a dragon shifter, which I suspected he was, he was, without a doubt, my enemy.

I was still deep in thought when Alysha handed me a steaming bowl of stew. I breathed in the fragrant, hearty meal, and the smell alone could have filled me. Yet, I almost began to cry as actual food filled this bowl.

It had been far too long since I'd had a proper meal. The gnawing, aching emptiness had become so sharply intense that it had become a part of me, eating away at me every second of every day. The ability to enjoy a full meal nearly threw me into a new wave of dizziness.

I forced myself to swallow and take a long, deep breath to center myself before I clawed my way to the food. The smell hit me as my stomach twisted, demanding I fill it. I held back, fearful I would make a scene.

"Thank you," I murmured gratefully, slowly taking a seat at the long wooden table that dominated the center of the room. The savory aroma of the food was almost too much to bear, but I forced myself to restrain my hunger. I didn't want to appear ungrateful or, worse, animalistic.

"Can I ask you something?" I ventured after a moment, watching as Billy expertly slid a tray of golden-brown loaves from the oven. "I've heard there's a curse on the woods outside the castle. As a matter of fact,

I've never heard nor seen this castle before. Where did this come from and why doesn't anyone know it's here? Is it cursed?"

Alysha glanced over at her son before answering. "Yes, there's a curse, placed by the moon goddess herself centuries ago. We're bound to these castle grounds, unable to leave." She paused, moving to wipe her hands on a cloth as she sat across from me. "The reason you have not heard of the castle is because of the curse's nature. It shields the castle not only from outsiders who might find themselves running across it but also from the memories of those who might remember it."

I thought back to the sounds of the roar of a giant beast, my memories fuzzy. The crimson eyes watching me in the cave before I passed out still clear in my mind. "So how did I get here then?"

"Most likely the dragon brought you."

"I'm sorry, what?" My head swung around as I regarded her. "Why would a dragon bring me here?"

"Only he would know the answer to that question, but what were you doing before you came?"

"I was being chased by a pack of wolves," I admitted as a shiver shuddered up my spine at the memory of Gideon's teeth so close to ripping me to shreds or dragging me back to his den.

Alysha placed a gentle hand on my shoulder, her eyes full of empathy. "I believe the dragon brought you here to protect you," she said softly, her voice laced with understanding and warmth.

I considered that for a long moment, shoveling the delectable stew into my mouth and taking a small roll that Billy handed to me to sop up some of the juices. I moaned, unable to contain myself, as I finally allowed myself to unleash, to relax just a little.

"So no one knows about this castle, its inhabitants, or how to get in?" I asked, eating a mouthful of food, not caring that my manners were atrocious. Once upon a time, those things mattered to me, but not anymore.

"No, very few people know of the castle unless they've been here. Once you're here, it's hard to leave." Alysha watched me with pity in her eyes as I continued to empty the bowl like an ill-mannered savage beast.

"You only leave if she lets you," Billy piped in.

"Who?" I mumbled, my gaze locking onto his hands.

He seemed to shrink back from me. I realized then that my eyes must be too hard, so I tried to soften my expression. I'd been told on more than one occasion that I was too pretty to constantly scowl, yet it seemed to be consistently plastered on my face by default. I had little experience with children, but I was positive my natural expression might have been scaring him off.

"I'm sorry," I said in a soothing voice. "I've lived a hard life the last few years and, well, it shows." My voice softened as I held his expression, not wanting to spook him. "Forgive me?"

Billy grinned so big that it stretched wide across his face, showing the crooked teeth still trying to find their place as he grew into them.

"Hard life? Are you not a princess?" Alysha asked warily, her head tilting as she studied me again, taking in my broken, dirty fingernails. My pale moonlight hair was pulled back in a haphazard braid, and my clothes were tattered and dirty from more than a night in the woods and stuck to a ledge in a cave.

No, the kind of wear and tear and grime that coated me was over a long period of poverty. I was aware of what I looked like. This was my best outfit, too—the one I painstakingly mended repeatedly and cleaned in the ice-cold stream to wear to the bookstore for work. Most times, it was still damp.

I straightened my spine and lifted my chin as my voice hardened. "I was once the daughter of a prince so in a way, yes, I was a princess. Our kingdom was destroyed. So I am the princess of nothing now."

"I see." That damned look of pity crossed Alysha's face again. It made me press my lips in a hard line. I hated being pitied.

"You sound like you're a warrior." Billy breathed out in awe as he crept closer. "Do you fight?"

I thought back to the basic defense classes I had taken as a child, the memories long since lost, and shook my head. My ability to fight rested on being able to knee or kick them where it hurt the most or run away and hope for survival. Obviously, that didn't get me too far. No, it had trapped me in a cursed castle with a grumpy man and these people. My outlook seemed to darken at that moment. Thinking of the future was hard when you couldn't see one.

"How long have you been here?" I asked to distract myself from my dark thoughts.

"Far too many centuries now, I suppose," Alysha said wistfully as she studied the greenery out the window.

The sky was bright, and the sun was shining without a cloud, though I had remembered reading in the papers that the forecast was rain for the next week. My mind snapped out of my thoughts of rain.

"Wait, did you say centuries?" I leaned closer, studying her. It was impossible. Those of other origins, such as sifters and vampires, could live long lives of many thousands of years, but they did age. She looked as if she wasn't a day over twenty.

"Give or take a few decades. It's hard to keep track after a while." She shrugged.

"You don't look that old," I said before stopping.

Alysha busted out laughing just as Billy took my now empty bowl and filled it again with more stew.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath, my appetite suddenly dampened by this revelation. I clamped my hands over my lips, realizing I'd just cursed in front of a child. "That's... I'm sorry."

"May I ask you a question? Please, if it is too forward, I apologize," Alysha began as she pulled off another chunk of bread and handed it to me.

"Of course," I answered before dipping the bread into the dish, which was just as good as the last bowl of stew. I felt myself stiffen as if I knew what was coming next. What she would ask.

"What are you?" she asked abruptly and straight to the point.

It occurred to me that Lore hadn't told her. He knew I was part vampire, or at least suspected it. He'd mentioned how death clung to me. Perhaps that was just the smell of living with a vampire. They did smell like death in a way—the aroma of wilted and dead flowers. They covered the smell with fragrant soaps, perfumes, and deodorants, but the scent lingered.

I sat my spoon down and shifted my gaze warily to hers, ready for them to throw me out or spit on me. I squared my shoulders and held her gaze, prepared for the blow. "Half vampire."

"And the other half?" she asked without flinching.

I shrugged. "Human," I said, not bothering to mention that I didn't honestly know the answer to that part of my heritage. When I asked my father, he responded, "A mistake; that's what you are." I stopped asking.

I paused, tipping the bowl back until it was empty, and stood to paddle more into it, with Alysha's nod that it was okay. This was more food than I'd had in a month or two.

"I'm sorry to hear you've been cursed," I admitted as I sat and began on the new bowl. I knew there was some proprietary rule to follow not to eat so much, but the type of hunger I'd suffered didn't give a damn about that. All it cared about was feeling full. So, I quickly had eaten the second bowl. I realized I'd not tasted either bowl in my haste to eat it. Which was why I'd ladled another bowl, this one to enjoy leisurely.

Only the lack of food for so long and the fact this was my third bowl made me realize my eyes were far bigger than my shrunken stomach. Soon, I felt the threat of an eruption. Mortified, I searched the room for a waste basket or anything that I could use to expel what was now threatening to come back up.

Panic seized me, and with one quick glance at Alysha, I saw her eyes widen.

I turned to the back door, feeling as if I were ready to hurl up my guts any second. I was doing everything I could to keep it contained long enough to make it outside. I ripped open the door, falling to my knees. I retched onto the ground, but boots were in the way. My three-course stew meal erupted from my throat like a volcano, splattering all over the boots as I felt the contents of my stomach empty.

The boots tried to move out of the way, but it seemed we were not in sync because every time I turned to try to hurl away from the boots, the owner seemed to have the same idea. So they stepped right back in front of me.

I heard him curse and retreat, and it was hard to tell if my stomach was the victor or the loser. Finally, once the racketing convulsions seized, I lifted my head, ready to apologize to the unfortunate recipient of my three-course meal. My gaze met his stern glare, and my apology stilled on my lips as I wiped my mouth.

Lore stood in front of me.

"Please explain to me why I'm now wearing your dinner. What are you, a barbarian?" he demanded as he stared down at his boots. Boots that were well worn and not in the slightest bit new. Now very colorfully decorated.

"Well, it's not like it could make them any worse," I muttered as I pulled myself to stand, still clutching my stomach, and pressed one hand

over my mouth to stop further issues. My stomach had calmed, but I had trust issues, which appeared to extend to my own bodily functions. I prayed that some of the meal would stay in my stomach and that I wouldn't wake again with hunger pains in the middle of the night.

"Barbarian it is then," Lore muttered, shaking off his boots and inspecting them as if I'd taken something precious from him. "These are the last pair I have. Do you have any idea how long I've had these?" he grumbled.

"From the looks of it, since the beginning of time." The wear on the boot showed where his toes had pressed into the side. They were scuffed and now covered in my stomach acid and meal. "If that's your last pair, you're screwed."

I looked down at my slippers, tattered and worn to the barest slice of protection. They hugged my feet a few sizes too small. They were the last pair we'd been able to afford after we left the Vampire Court. I didn't sympathize with him if that was what he was looking for.

Lore sighed as he inspected my shoes with me. He exhaled long and hard. "I suppose you do understand."

Anger bubbled up inside of me. I wanted to lash out to hide from his pity. "You have no idea what I understand," I growled, unsure why I was so upset with him. I'd thrown up all over him and should have apologized, but instead, I was picking a fight. Something in the way he had looked at me made me want to fight him. To rage against him, to yell, "How dare you judge me?" It was the look I'd seen a thousand times since leaving the Vampire Court, and I'd received the same pitiful look a thousand times more at the Vampire Court. The pitiful half-breed.

I hated it, and at that moment, it made me hate him, too.

"That's right. I do and I don't need your pity!" I yelled before stomping off, only to slow a few paces as my stomach threatened to turn over once again. My hand shot up to steady myself on the rough stone of the castle keep. The sun overhead beat down upon me, but the warmth never seemed to reach my skin. Even in the sun, a chill seemed to cling to this place. A chill that wrapped its cold fingers around me and held on.

"It's not pity," Lore grumbled in a deep voice from behind me. "I understand."

I whirled around, my stomach protesting as I did. "How? How would you understand? Have you ever been thrown out of your kingdom and

painted the villain, the reason it fell? Have you ever gone hungry for so long that you begged for death? Have you ever had to wear shoes made for you as a child and pray that your feet didn't get bigger because you'd never be able to afford a new pair? Have you ever had to decide between starving and being warm?" I paused, searching his face, seeing nothing in its complicated depths. "No? You know nothing."

I didn't know why I lashed out, only that it felt good. So many years I had pushed that anger and resentment of my life down. At this moment, in this hopeless situation where the whole world seemed to be tumbling down on top of it, I gave it all to him.

"You're right. I don't know," Lore admitted. "We're strangers. We don't know each other and it's clear that you've had a rough life."

I opened my mouth to retort and yell at him again, but his earnest look and words made me clamp my lips shut, turn, and storm away. About ten minutes later, I found myself in the castle with no idea where to go, lost in more ways than one, and now mortified at how I'd unleashed a whole heap of crazy on Lore.

Because I knew he didn't deserve it.

CHAPTER 7

Bella

The clock in front of me didn't move. The ticking hands were frozen to what I presumed to be the moment the castle had been cursed—right on the hour the cuckoo bird would come out to sing its hourly song. The bird sat mockingly on its extended perch as it waited to go back inside the clock. It had waited for a very long time.

I'd long since passed the area of the castle that was the most unkempt. Here, in the further reaches of the enormous keep, the layer of dust and grime became thicker. The curtains and art darkened and tattered over time, yet they were still pristine under the dirt.

Hours later, hours I'd spent exploring the castle and hiding as the anger passed and mortification took over, no one had come for me. Either because they thought I was a raving mad woman, or they just didn't care what I did, I didn't know.

Soon after, I found myself deep in the bowels of the keep. I was lost, and night was encroaching. There were many odd things about this castle.

Piles of old furniture scattered throughout, some stacked with blankets and coverings folded on top as if to keep them safe, others in things like chairs and beds. The castle seemed endless. Even the Vampire Court's castle had not been this large.

It had been the paintings and stained-glass windows that had stopped me in my tracks in awe. They were paintings of dragons and people, royalty. Generations of families shared similar features with crowns on their heads, and in the background were always dragons—dragons soaring

in the sky or nestled close by, dragons that lit the landscape up with fire and others with ice.

I stood there wondering if the royal family had their own dragon, similar to what witches had in a familiar. Dragon shifters had once been part of the sun goddess's creatures, but they had long since gone out of existence. Long before these paintings had been done. So perhaps they had the last dragons that soared the skies and had bound the dragons to them.

Shifters were all created by the sun goddess when she gave her creatures a mortal form. Not all creatures chose to take a mortal form, but the ones that did soon became the shifters that now populated the two clans. Even the wolves were once Sun's creation, but the wolves' strong pull toward the full moon led them to the moon goddess.

I watched the paned glass windows tell the story of how the moon goddess had taken the wolves from the sun goddess, and how they'd gone to war. Two celestial sisters fighting over their creations like children.

In one glass pane, a beautiful bird made of fire flew through the sky. As I stared at the firebird, the phoenix stretched its beautiful orange and red wings out fiercely like it was dying to touch the sun. I felt my heart race and my breath still as I stared at it. I reached out, ready to stand on tiptoe and touch it. Only it was too high up for my short stature. The more I stared at it, the more drawn to it I felt. Something about the bird called to me. Something that seemed to niggle in the back of my skull, like a familiarity I couldn't even begin to understand.

Finally, I tore my gaze from the beautiful bird and studied the two celestials, depicted with pale hair similar to mine. Both were as different as day and night, yet they were two sides of the same coin. Both were in a war against the other, with mortals and supernatural creatures caught in the middle of the destruction wrought by their hatred for each other.

I snorted as I studied the story depicted. It showed more dragons as they fought in a raging battle with the other side. The creatures of the night and those of the day in an epic battle that would devastate the lands, leaving both sides decimated.

In the following stained-glass window, the vibrant colors of crimson, emerald, and gold, just to name a few, portrayed the aftermath. The land burned around a beautiful moonlight-haired woman, clearly depicted as the sun goddess, as the celestial halo shone around her head. She was on

her knees among a river of blood. Her face captured a sorrow so deep my breath caught in my throat.

My eyes fixed on one pane—a goddess damning a ruined kingdom. Ominous words flowed beneath:

"When crimson stains the silver moon, the end shall come. Only the sacrifice of the cursed beloved will renew what was undone."

A cryptic prophecy seemed to hover in the air, but I pushed the thought away. I had to unravel the castle's mysteries, no matter the cost. I reached out to touch the goddess's image only to snatch my hand back, fearful that she would step right out and unleash her rage on me. She would see me as one of the demons who had helped destroy her and her creations, though I was a product of one of her vampires.

I needed to understand this castle and these people if I was ever going to escape and find a place far away from here, the village, and my father. Maybe I could find a job in the human village to the north.

My memories flooded me as I remembered cowering in the dark while a woman just as beautiful and tall had passed me, unleashing her anger on my uncle's court. The same pale hair that seemed to glow floated behind her. A shiver ran up my back, and I swallowed hard, pushing down the sinking feeling that everything was more connected than I cared to acknowledge.

I knew the story, or at least the one the victorious Vampire Court told. Moon clan's creatures were made for death and destruction, rising victorious from the ashes. Because they were made from curses and dark magic, they cursed the kingdom to be forgotten, and it had been. I thought about the story Nan would tell me, but it was so long ago, and the details were fuzzy.

I shook my head, trying to force the memory of the story to the surface, only to become frustrated. I moved on, shaking my head.

A young girl was following, with crimson hair and a grimace on her face as she stood almost defiantly in the face of a new figure. The moon goddess with her long pale hair blowing in the wind and a heart in her hand. A viscous smile twisted her lips up in cruelty. It was then I saw the girl was bleeding from the spot her heart would be.

The next scene was that of war, a much bloodier and vicious one at the end of the scene. It showed the moon goddess on her knees, holding a different girl. Destruction was all around her. Yet, she seemed oblivious

because her attention was on the young girl with midnight hair and pale skin in her arms. On the moon goddess's face was vengeance.

I moved on, studying the images. One showed a castle much like this one, tangled in thorns. Above, a lone red dragon stood guard. Too few lived here now—Lore, Alastair, Alysha, and her son. I wondered again if the dragon confined them within these walls.

I found myself thrust into a memory from so long ago that rained down upon me as the wails of burning vampires in agony from engulfing flames had seared my ears. Smoke and the smell of sickly burnt meat and flames had burned my nose as I coughed and searched through the devastation, calling out for my Nan. She had been close to me, but then there had been destruction everywhere I had turned.

As the smoke had cleared, I'd seen the carnage. The palace had been in ruins. A fire had swept through whatever structures remained like a vengeful god, as if it had been seeking out life to snuff out with a mind of its own.

I'd heard the screams. Nan was nowhere, and I had been scared. So I'd run. I had run until I was out of the palace and the flames and then I'd hid. Just as I'd seen her, she'd had an ethereal glow and long moonlight hair. Her skin was pale, a cream, and so powerful. It was as if she had brought the might of the moon with her as she'd moved closer to the palace, a wicked grin on her lips.

"Let's see them break a curse after true death." She'd cackled in a way that had my hands pressed against my ears in pain. It had been the last thing I'd seen before I'd passed out and then woke up to the utter destruction of the palace.

Nothing and no one had been left alive. All that had remained were ruins and a burnt-out shell, and the lingering wrath of the moon goddess remained.

I found myself in the present as that one memory, long forgotten, resurfaced, leaving me feeling weak and more confused. It had been the moon goddess, Nyx, all along that had destroyed the Vampire Court.

What had happened that would cause her to turn on her own creatures?

Why had I been brought here? To break the curse? To defeat the dragon? Fear slithered down my spine. The only way to break the curse would be to slay the dragon.

CHAPTER 8

Bella

The hallway changed as my feet moved. It seemed to go on forever, deeper into the castle until I was no longer sure how to return. I turned once, then twice, thinking it would lead me back to the part of the castle I had been in, the part that still looked lived in.

The rooms seemed to turn colder as an icy chill developed in the air. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to contain what little warmth I had left as the hallway darkened to nothing but shadows. I entered a room dusty with age, but you could tell once upon a time, it had been clean and new. The room felt frozen in time yet decaying.

This long-forgotten room was much different from the other areas of the castle. The ones below littered with furniture were maintained, but this room was long forgotten. I explored the space, my hand shooting up to cover my nose as I felt a sneeze coming on. The smell was also slightly enhanced for me. I could smell a layer of odors, but not nearly to the same degree as my vampire family, and only if it was near me. The smell of stale roses was faint in this room under the smell of grime, dust, and stale air. I continued on.

It was a large sitting room flanked by two windows with curtains stained gray and tattered from age and a door that led out to a terrace. There was a shelf for books falling apart and covered in grime, with a teacup on a delicate saucer that had once been white. Layers of dust had turned it gray, its contents long dried to a dark sludge.

I moved further into the room, realizing this was a woman's room. The bedroom held a four-poster bed with frilly pink bedding that had darkened. The coloring had changed drastically with time. There were holes in various places, and dead moths littered around the room—the only signs of damage besides the dirt.

There was a sense that whoever had left this space had done so in a hurry, never to return.

I moved further into the space as a new waft of dusty air hit me in the face as if a ghostly apparition had moved around, disturbing the dust. Before I could stop myself, I sneezed, which only made it worse.

I inhaled sharply, feeling another sneeze build as dust flew into my face. "Damnit!" I sneezed again. Goose pimples prickled across my skin as the room grew colder and heavier. With that, I knew it was time to leave.

With a long sigh, I turned, leaving the area and its history to the ghosts of the past. Just as I was leaving, I swore I had heard a whispered goodbye.

"What are you doing in this part of the castle?" a deep voice demanded behind me, Lore's voice. I turned to find him inspecting me with his candescent blue eyes.

There was nothing to find, or he found me lacking because his lips pressed together in a thin line, and his thick, dark, auburn eyebrows drew together, creating a deep indent between them. I examined him as he met my gaze with steel and didn't answer, waiting to see what he would say. It was something I picked up as a young child.

It was always best to remain quiet, watch, and wait to see what the other person did, then continue.

Lore liked to use the same tactic because my silence didn't deter him from waiting. I examined his rugged yet attractive face, the dark auburn of his hair, and the smattering of freckles that crossed the bridge of his aristocratic nose.

I broke first.

"Why are you in this part of the castle?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest, digging my heels in, and lifting my chin defiantly.

A smile briefly twitched at the corners of his mouth before he strolled forward. "Don't play with me," he growled low and threateningly, almost inhuman. "You should stay out of this area of the keep."

"Why?" I demanded, standing firm as he stepped closer. I knew danger when it stood before me, and he was dripping in it. Yet I lifted my chin,

refusing to back down.

"Because you are not allowed." A hint of annoyance was in his tone, as if he couldn't believe I was questioning him. I felt my own lips twitch at that.

"Well, I have a tendency to do things I'm not supposed to do," I admitted, looking away because it was true. I did do things all the time that pissed my father off, that got me fired, that made the villagers hate me all the more. With a sigh, I started to back up, but Lore grabbed my arms, holding me in place.

"What was that?" he asked, far too close for what was appropriate.

"What was what?" I asked, pretending I had no idea what he was asking. He saw far too much, and it unnerved me. In mere moments in his presence, this man seemed to see more than I wanted him to.

"That look, what were you thinking about?" he asked, his voice firm and demanding as his hands held me, gentle yet unyielding.

I sighed. "It was nothing. Let me go. I'll remember not to come here again."

"I'll let you go if you tell me what you were thinking," he demanded again, moving closer to me as I backed up until my back hit the wall.

"Fine." I squirmed in his arms, sighed deeply, and gave into him. "Where I'm from, people don't really like me," I admitted with a huff, rolling my eyes to hide that it bothered me, but Lore's eyes seemed to bore into me. Like he saw into my soul what I was trying to hide. I barely knew this man and his proximity was unnerving in a way I couldn't describe. I pulled from his arms to escape, but he only boxed me in with his arms and searched my face.

"I find that hard to believe, yet at the same time I can believe it." He searched my face, that damn mouth of his twitching into a half-grin as if he were trying to hold it back. One side of him was winning or losing, depending on how you looked at it.

As if out of character, his fingers caressed my cheek as longing entered his gaze. As quickly as it happened, his hand fell away, and his features changed as if I had imagined it.

"I don't care if you believe me. Let me go," I begged with more force this time. The heat from his body and his closeness had my heart speeding at a rate that I could hear pounding in my ears as my breathing became

ragged. I shook my head, trying to figure out why his being so close to me affected me in such a way.

Lore stared at my lips, a heated look that turned into confusion as he dropped his shield again and let me glimpse the raw need it hid. I felt my body wanting to arch, wanting to tilt my head up as I, too, found my gaze going to his mouth as I lost the fight and licked my own dry lips.

With an exhale, he pushed off the wall, turned, and left me there, pressed against the cold stone wall at my back, my heartbeat pounding and my breaths ragged. What was wrong with me?

"You'll need to get used to us then if you are going to stay." Lore sighed as if the weight of those words hung heavily on his shoulders.

"I get to stay here?" My head whipped around. The amount of back-and-forth with this man was enough to give me whiplash. "Why?"

"Do you have somewhere else to go?" Lore asked, watching me wearily.

My voice lowered as my shoulders slumped. "No." I shook my head sadly as I thought about it. If I left, I'd run away without direction, money, or protection. At least here, I could devise a plan that didn't include storming into the cold night. "No, I suppose I don't."

"Then stay, for now."

Despite everything, for now, it sounded pretty good.

CHAPTER 9

Bella

It took me half the night to find my way to the castle's front door. Another hour to find my way back to the kitchen, where I found Alysha chatting with Alastair.

"Did Lore not show you to your room?" Alysha asked, her eyebrows shooting up as she rose.

"No." I noted the intimate way they had both been sitting, the red flush that had spread across Alysha's face as if it were indecent and she had been caught doing something wrong. "He did not."

"That man!" She moved across the room, sparing Alastair not a backward glance, and moved to my side. "Well, I best be showing you then," she said with a slight accent.

I followed her into the castle, and as we ascended the steps, we veered toward the left instead of the right.

"The castle is too big for us to keep up with fully," she said as we passed a few hallways and rooms. "There are a few areas I try to keep as clean as possible. I use this room in the summer because it's cooler, but it'll do for you tonight until we can get you something better and cleaner."

We entered a room that was bigger than my house in the village. A sitting room with a room off to the side, but there were also double doors that led to a balcony. There was a thin layer of dust, but not as bad as the other areas I had explored. This was dusty from just a few weeks of not being used. Alysha busied herself with the fireplace as I studied the room. The bed was less intricate than the room I'd explored earlier. The

bedspread appeared handmade, stitched together from various cloth, yet it looked warm, cozy, and most importantly, comfortable.

The day's events seemed to catch up to me quickly, and I felt the tiredness hit my bones. My mind was a mass of thoughts that seemed like a firestorm within me, even as the weariness pulled me down. After walking for what seemed like hours, combined with the sudden filling and emptying of my stomach, exhaustion seeped into my bones. I could have dropped right there on the floor.

I stumbled forward, grasping the bedpost, too tired to study it further than to know it was solid beneath my fingers. Alysha paused in her work to look over her shoulder. The flint stilled in her hands.

"It's a hard transition. This is a different world. But you'll get used to it." She stood, walking over to me. Her hand gently grasped my arm. I wanted to tell her I was fine, but my words caught in my throat as I felt my eyelids threatening to close on me. She helped me to the bed, pulling back the covers. "I'm sorry dear. I'll get you some clothes together as well."

"This is fine," I mumbled, grateful for the warm bed.

"No, I completely forgot to get you the things you needed. It's just been so long since anyone has—"

"This is perfect," I said with more force as I kept my eyes open to meet her cerulean gaze. "'I've not slept in a real bed in so long."

Her head tilted to the side, and she gave me a half-clenched smile but said nothing as she helped me pull up the bedding. I was too tired to change from my filthy clothing.

I turned to my side, ready to dismiss her, and envisioned a time long ago when I had a room like this one. So long ago, when my father was still a prince, I didn't go hungry or cold. I hadn’t always been safe, but I had a semi-full belly and a fire in my hearth every night—which was something more than I had just a few nights ago.

Just as I closed my eyes, a roar sounded in the distance. I was too tired to care as my eyes closed, and a sigh escaped my lips, giving into the warmth from the fire that wrapped around me. I was out before Alysha even left.

The rattling of dishes woke me. The instant my eyes opened, I felt the day was much later than I was used to waking up. Usually, despite my constant fatigue, I would wake with the sun as if I couldn't bear to miss even one ray of its warmth before it was violently torn from my grasp one day.

"Good morning, sleepy head," a soft voice murmured.

I lay there for a moment, looking around as confusion hit me until it all came crashing down: where I was, what had happened, that I was finally out of my father's grasp but no safer than I had been there.

One thing I was thankful for, at least here, was food.

On a tray, there was buttered bread, a small bowl of jam, eggs, bacon, and a mouth-watering blueberry muffin. It was the cup of tea that held my attention. It was hot and steaming.

"I wasn't sure how you took your tea, so I brought some milk and a bit of sweetener. Mind you, it's not sugar. We've been plumb out of that for quite a long time, but I learned how to create something similar a few years back." Alysha paused as I adjusted, took the tray, and stared at the bounty. I felt the emotions bubbling up inside of me. Tears threatened to spill over my eyes just as she had brought me breakfast in bed.

"Thank you." I sniffled as my stomach grumbled loudly, reminding me I'd emptied my last meal on the boots of the broody male, Lore.

Alysha's voice softened. "Are you all right?" she asked, sitting next to me.

"Yes," I mumbled as I shoveled the egg into my mouth, trying to stifle the memory of the last time my nursemaid had brought me breakfast in bed. It had been my birthday, and my world had toppled to the ground that same day.

My nursemaid had died that day, along with most of the court. She'd been the only kindness I'd known there. The closest thing to a mother I'd had. Now she was dead, and I was still here. It didn't seem fair.

"Do you remember how to get to the kitchen?" she asked after a long moment of watching me.

I nodded, not looking up from my plate. I feared I'd lose it and show more of myself than I was ready to share.

"Good. Everywhere in the castle is open, but I recommend staying out of the east wing. Only ghosts and monsters are found there."

"The dragon?" I asked, washing down the food with a scalding hot gulp of tea.

"He only comes out at night," she reassured me as she approached the door.

"Wait. I'm not a prisoner, am I?"

She turned, studying me, her lips pressing together briefly as she finally sighed. "No, of course not. I don't think you should try to leave either."

"Why not?" I asked, pushing the tray aside and preparing for a fight. In my brief conversation with Lore, he had told me he wanted me to stay; I had nowhere else to go. What if that had just been an illusion to make me feel less like a prisoner and more like a guest?

Alysha lifted her palms toward me with a grim expression before she folded her hands demurely in front of herself. "You can try but I don't think the castle will let you."

"The castle?" I stared at her as if she had gone crazy.

"Yes, you remember us mentioning a curse, right?" She paused, her face searching mine as if trying to decide how to explain it without sounding crazy.

I had news for her. This whole thing was crazy. I was beginning to believe I'd been caught, cracked my head, and was either dead or stuck in some unconscious prison within my mind. No telling what atrocities were happening to my body if that were the case. I pinched myself, wincing as I did. Alysha observed me but merely shook her head and turned.

"When you're ready, I'll be in the kitchen." She moved to the door and paused her hand on the doorknob. "I'm happy you are here, Bella. I look forward to us becoming friends," she said before disappearing into the hallway.

And with that, I was left to my own devices. Which was not a good idea for anyone.

CHAPTER 10

Bella

In frustration, I kicked the door before me as hard as possible. I'd pushed, pulled, climbed, even threw a large stone, but nothing budged the thick wood. At first, I thought the doors were locked from within, making the claim that I wasn't a prisoner a blatant lie. However, I realized an important detail after examining each outside door around the castle walls.

It was sealed, immovable.

I turned briefly to glance back at the castle, tall and imposing, yet the walls before me seemed just as tall and staggering. The layers of stone, tall and thick, were built to keep enemies out or, in my case, to keep me in. Though I knew I had sanctuary here, I liked having options—an escape route if needed. I needed to know what I was dealing with.

This wall was in my way.

It wasn't until I tried to climb over the wall that I realized the real issue. I reached the top of the wall and looked out for the briefest moments to see thorns and vines so big and thick it was its own forest. It encased the castle gate, its width making it impossible to pass through or even around. The thorns and vines were larger and denser than anything I had ever seen before.

The large thorns were sharp as daggers. I reached out to one to test it, and my hand sliced open. I lost my balance, only just grasping the stone with my other hand to keep myself from plunging to a death of impalement.

"Seriously!" I yelled into the space beyond, but it bounced off something, hitting me like an echo. I ground my teeth together as I tried to push the pain down.

I looked at the clothing Alysha had left me with a grimace. A tunic with long sleeves, simple stitching covering leggings, and boots that fit like a glove. I hadn't worn anything this fine in a long time. With a sigh, I tore the sleeve off my opposite hand to use to bandage my bleeding hand.

I stared at the vines that seemed to go on forever in a thick wall. As I stood and turned, I could see it surrounded the entire area in the same thick radius. The woods took up the mantle of protection in the near distance. As I moved along the wall, I studied how the vines clung to the castle, the door to the outside world pressed in and sealed by them.

I walked the length to what looked like a front gate. I leaned over, studying the vines that stopped where the stone crumbled in areas, and once again reached out to them to see if I could cut through them with my dagger. As I reached to slice through the nearest vine, something threw me backward off the wall and into a heap in the castle courtyard. I slammed into the ground hard enough to knock the air from my lungs and bring stars to my eyes.

I rolled over and groaned, pulling my throbbing hands to my chest as the blood once again flowed freely. The sun over my head became heavily shadowed as I realized someone was standing over me, and slowly, I peeled my eyes open.

Eyes as blue as a cloudless day peered down at me from the most stupidly attractive face I'd ever seen. Too bad it belonged to one of the biggest prejudiced assholes I'd ever met.

"Done trying to escape?" he asked, studying me with an arrogant smirk.

"There's no way to get out, is there?" I groaned as I rolled over, ignoring his offered hand. As I stood, his eyes went to my bloody hand.

"Not unless it wants you to go." Lore's eyes were still on my hand as his nose flared.

"So that whole thing of wanting me out?"

He shrugged. "Wishful thinking." He moved closer, his eyes raking over my prone form. "Come, we need to get that treated quickly." His eyes landed firmly on my bleeding hand.

"Why? It's just a cut." I jerked back as he reached for my hand, refusing his help.

His lips pressed into a thin line, but he didn't reach for me again.

"Do you like your hand?" He sounded annoyed as if I were ruining his day with my existence. He threaded his hands through his auburn hair, pulling it from its tie as it came undone. The long strands brushed his broad shoulders.

I stared as my lips suddenly felt dry. I licked them. "What do you mean?" I asked, my pulse pounding again. His presence made my heart change cadence to its own rhythm, which seemed determined to beat its way straight out of my chest. Traitor.

"The thorns." He pointed to my hand.

"Yeah, and?" I asked sharply as I forced my breathing to slow. An odd flush was now spreading across my body.

Lore stepped toward me, his arms outstretched as I felt the world tilt on its axis. He grasped my arms, and I didn't jerk out of his grasp this time. "And," he snapped low before taking a deep breath and exhaling, speaking as if talking to an injured animal. " It's poisonous."

It was three steps before I stumbled. My tongue seemed to grow as every word I uttered sounded like I was talking with a ball in my mouth. Lore took pity on me, lifting me into his arms.

“Ith thar ah ahntihdoh?” I tried to utter, but it made no sense to my ears, and the drool that followed each carefully formed syllable was enough for me to shut my mouth and accept my fate.

"There is an antidote, yes."

Lore surprised me by deciphering my slurred and garbled words. My eyes must have shown my shock because he chuckled. The sound was deep and infectious, warm in a way that seemed in stark contrast to the situation. In his arms, I was close to him—me, the half-vampire enemy.

I was literally drooling all over him. Not in the *oh, he's so attractive way*—which he was, much to my chagrin—but in the literal sense. My head lolled to the side, and the spit in my mouth dribbled out and onto his now-wet shirt. Soon, it was drenched, and I wanted to die of mortification. Just my luck, I finally drooled for an attractive guy, and it was with actual drool.

I knew I needed to keep my guard up as Lore walked us through the courtyard, but soon, my head seemed to swim so fast that I closed my

eyes. Lore's hand pressed my head down, and I felt it connect with his neck and shoulder. He no longer allowed my drool to wet his shirt but now his actual skin. If I wasn't in a dire situation, I'd snatch his dagger up and jam it in my heart just to end my embarrassment because how in the world could one person drool this much?

"Ith thenkth yew need ah nee…" I stopped as spittle flew at each word I tried to say, only furthering my humiliation. I wanted to tell him he needed a new shirt and to just put me down, but instead, more slobber covered us both. What the hell was in those thorns?

I closed my mouth tightly, trying my best not to further the issue, and rested my head against his skin.

Gods, he was warm, enveloping my senses like a toasty embrace. The crisp, earthy aroma of pine needles clung to his skin, evoking images of a lush, green forest after a morning rain. Beneath it lay traces of hickory wood smoke, tendrils of the rich smoldering scent wrapping around him and conjuring cozy evenings curled by a crackling fire.

The tantalizing hint of sweetness, some sugary and mysterious nectar, pulled me in like a siren's call, making my mouth water with longing. It conjured visions of lazy summer days filled with sticky fingertips and stolen kisses under the shade of a peach tree.

His scent was a delicious contradiction—the rugged wilderness and raw masculinity of the outdoors marbled with an irresistible sweetness and warmth. I breathed him in, letting his aroma fill my lungs and awaken my senses. He smelled like temptation, adventure, and comfort, all rolled into one intoxicating aroma that left me desperately craving more.

For a moment, I forgot I had been poisoned and almost choked on my tongue.

"Already?" a deep voice called somewhere in the distance, and I felt the atmosphere change.

A fire crackled in a fireplace, and the shuffling of feet sounded nearby. The aroma of freshly baked bread filled my senses, and I knew exactly where we were—in the kitchen. Cool hands touched my forehead, and I vaguely felt my body placed on a hard surface.

"She's turned feverish," Alysha's frantic voice admitted. "Get me the tonic and quick!" she yelled to someone.

I tried to open my eyes, but they refused to budge as if glued together. I sensed what was happening around me, not as if I were truly there, but as

if I was a blind observer unable to move or see.

"Lift her head and open her mouth," Alysha commanded whoever held me.

I felt nothing until something burned down my throat, setting my insides on fire. Something that tasted of fire, herbs, and blood. I choked, and only then did I feel myself turn my head and my lips pressed tightly together. My tongue began to feel more normal as I protested.

"No," I said, my eyes still closed as I violently shook my head. "Not bloo—" More searing liquid was forced down my throat, and then my lips and nose were closed, and I began to fight. Until I swallowed. The hold on me was released as my eyes flew open, and I tried to spit what remained in my mouth out.

Glaring at everyone in the room, Alysha stood over me with relief in her blue eyes as they softened on me. Alastair stood stoically close by, and I felt what I was laid back upon. It was a rigid body with hands still holding me loosely now in place. I turned my head to see Lore.

His stern glare seemed at odds with the situation. "A vampire that doesn't like blood. Imagine that."

"There's vampire blood in that." I clamped my lips together, refusing to take another drop even as I felt the effects begin to work.

The acrid taste of old blood. The slight taste of rot that came with the undead numbed my tongue, and then, in horror, I realized it turned sweet. I was ashamed to admit I enjoyed the taste.

“This… I…” I couldn't form words as I tried to process it. I'd drank vampire blood. The memory of the day my father had forced some down my throat and was planning to kill me only to conveniently forget. I'd waited all day for my mortal death. I'd never forget the taste.

"Yes, necessary evil to clear the poison." Lore shrugged unapologetically. Unaware of the turmoil boiling inside of me.

"I hate you." I spat whatever was left over of the tonic onto his face.

He didn't flinch; he only pushed me up, stood, and paused shy of the door. My mortification over slobbering on him ceased as I hoped he was drenched in it. Served the bastard right.

"And I hate you too, vampire," he barked as the door shut behind him.

He'd known. That bastard had known I'd hated blood and yet didn't care. Even if it was a tonic to save my life, he didn't have to use vampire blood. Though vampire blood wouldn't hurt me or turn me in such small

quantities, having it in my system, anything could happen. If I died, it could be enough to transition me to a full-fledged vampire. The fear was enough to send a sharp pain of fear through me.

Yes, it had healing properties, but it had far worse consequences for me. It could entirely turn me. Anger boiled inside me as I thought about the possibilities. A little bit probably wouldn't affect me as much, which was a relief. I still felt the tenseness of my muscles as the anger dissipated. Soon, I forced myself to relax, and resolve filled me.

In that moment, everything clicked, and I knew exactly how to escape this place and save these people. All I had to do was take out Lore and break this cursed hold he had on us. It was nothing less than he deserved.

Only my dagger was now lost in a dangerous, poisonous jungle of thorns and vines.

I slowly stood up, then went to brush the dirt from my now bloodied clothing, wincing when I remembered my hand and the cut.

“Give me your hand.” Alysha held her palm out.

I stared at her palm for a long moment before my gaze traveled to look around. Alysha had supplies ready to clean and bandage it, and as my eyes met hers, I realized it would be a losing fight to deny her. With a sigh, I placed my palm in her hand and let her sit me in front of her as I watched her unwind the makeshift bandage.

"That was the last nice tunic in your size," Alysha chided. "You'll have to wear dresses from here on out."

She eyed the torn sleeve for a moment before going back to her work, tenderly cleaning the blood from the wound I now saw was deeper than I'd initially thought. Some green substance seemed to stick to my skin as she washed it away gently. I pressed my teeth together to keep from wincing from the pain, and then, as she began to clean the wound deeply, I bit my lip, stopping quickly when I tasted the coppery tang of blood. It was so different from the blood in the tonic, which had tasted like death.

I watched silently, already seeing the slow healing take place. It would be a few days, and only a red line and a scar would mar my hand.

"Do you know the story of how dragons came into existence?" Alysha asked as she leaned in close, sniffed the wound, and then pursed her lips together as if concentrating.

"The sun goddess created them." I shrugged, careful not to move. "Where I'm from, not much is taught about the sun clan other than they are

the enemy."

"Seems not much has changed in the world outside our walls," Alastair muttered from close by.

"No, I suppose it never does." Alysha nodded as she used something sticky to press my cut together, holding it tight. I tried to jerk back, but her grip became firm. So, I relented.

"I'm sure some things have changed…" I trailed off, unsure of how long they'd been here. Leggings and long tunics were a style from long ago.

Alastair sighed. "For me, it's been a few centuries." He paused, his gaze going to Alysha and softening. "But for them it's been longer than they can even begin to remember."

Alysha nodded. "Our real curse is time, it's true."

Alastair nodded with her as if they were synced to one another. "The dragons were born when the sun goddess was walking through her garden and came upon the most beautiful red flower. She reached out to touch it but, when she did, a thorn cut her hand. A drop of blood fell onto the earth and, from it, sprang the first dragon."

“Born of Blood and Thorns," I mumbled, suppressing a snort from the fable. I vaguely remembered the same tale, which, so long ago, was told as a bedtime tale. It was obviously a myth. I wanted to add that we had ways of knowing those things weren't true and that there was a predictability to magic and the goddesses. Instead, I held my tongue.

Alysha began wrapping my hand up again and then created a makeshift sling. "Do not move it until I say you can. You won't lose the use of it, but if you're not careful, your grip will never be the same if you don't let it heal properly."

"I think I need some air. Am I good to go?"

Alysha murmured, "Of course, dear."

These people needed me. They'd been kind in a way I'd not felt in a long time, and I felt a strong need to help them escape this situation. They were trapped in a cage made by the man and dragon holding them hostage. Just like my father had held me captive and forced me into a cage of my own. I couldn't just sit by and let this happen without doing something.

My thoughts drifted as I thought of our similarities: They were stuck under a curse, and I was stuck under a different kind of curse. There was

no reason that we couldn't all get out of this and live the lives we truly deserved.

As if they had forgotten me, I left, again alone. This time, I had a purpose. Find Lore, interrogate him, and maybe kill him. I was undecided on that last part, but it looked like the solution the longer I stayed here. Because I was convinced, the monster part of Alysha's warning had been of him. A dragon roamed the night, and if I wasn't mistaken, Lore was that dragon. He was the reason everyone was trapped. If that was the case, he needed to die.

CHAPTER 11

Bella

I spent hours exploring room after room, each with outdated furniture and knickknacks. The dust layers made it clear no one had lived in some of these spaces for a very long time. I wandered aimlessly, searching for any clue about the curse, but finding nothing but heaps of dirty furniture forgotten to time.

It was tragic.

More than ever, I realized I needed to learn more about this curse. The longer I explored and the longer I stayed here, the curiouser it all became. I felt an odd compulsion to continue. My gaze seemed drawn to the ceiling, where the beautiful scene was depicted. It was a visual representation of the love of the sun goddess. There was no doubt about it. It was mesmerizing.

I searched my memory of the palace I'd grown up in at the Vampire Court. No motifs or paintings were dedicated reverently and with so much love as this one to the moon goddess. No, instead, they barely spoke her name; if they did, it was in hushed tones of fear or obedience. In this castle, so far locked in the past, they had obviously loved her. Yet, it hadn't saved them from their fate.

As I stood there, I became lost in the past. The nights I'd sneak off from my room right under the nose of my nursemaid, Ola, whom I'd affectionately called Nan. Long after I was meant to be in bed, I'd peeked my head around curtains and corners in the ballroom of my uncle's court, where beautiful ladies in extravagant dresses had danced the night away

with handsome men. I'd watched them dance and had practiced their movements in the shadows, then I'd perform for my father later, who had clapped and pretended to be amused.

I could hear the music as if I were there now. As if caught by the magic of the past, I lifted my arms and began the movements of the dance I hadn't danced in years. I twirled and sidestepped, keeping to the music in my head. My feet remembered even though I had long forgotten the precise movements. At the end, I curtsied as if I were dancing with someone, and as I stood, I giggled, a smile stretching across my face and my gaze going back up to that ceiling motif. As if I had been dancing for her, the sun goddess.

The sound of clapping, slow and mocking, made my smile vanish and blood run cold. I stilled in place, breathing heavily from the dancing as my heart pounded.

"Are you lost?" an annoyed and deep voice asked as I jumped, embarrassment hitting me quickly as I felt the warmth spread through me.

It turned quickly to anger as I realized who had interrupted my thoughts: Lore. I glared at him.

"I must say, you dance beautifully. Almost as if you were courtly trained." He stepped forward, his eyes trailing up my body as if examining me in a new, more thorough light.

I said nothing.

Lore held out his hand to me. I raised an eyebrow but didn't budge. "Come. Indulge me. What else do we have to do with our time here?" He stared expectantly at me, waiting.

I sighed and took his hand with my good one. He turned to face me. I swore I heard the music again to the exact movements he made as he began to dance. He moved toward me, then turned as our hands almost met but not quite as we twirled away from one another. This dance was meant to tease. A push and pull of intimacy that was never quite enough.

The melody swelled from somewhere, no longer in my head, and Lore pulled me into the graceful steps of the dance. Irritation warred with unwilling admiration as we glided across the marble floor—he was an excellent dancer.

"I suppose royals must endure years of dance lessons," I commented. "Though I imagine you stepped on your fair share of toes before mastering this."

Lore shot me a wry look. "I was taught by the finest tutors. My footwork has always been flawless."

"Ah, so all those centuries alone just left you desperately starved for a partner then?" I asked with mock sympathy.

His eyes glinted at the challenge. His voice deepened to a timbre that warmed me from the inside as if it were melted chocolate and seduction. "I suppose you consider your own skills comparable after your rustic village upbringing?"

I raised a brow. "Please. I've been dancing since I was four years old. I could dance circles around you."

"Is that so?" Lore's eye widened in surprise before he quickly hid it and grinned. "Why don't you prove it?"

He spun me into a dizzying sequence of steps, but I matched him flawlessly. We moved together as though we had danced this very routine a hundred times before, anticipating each other's movements. Our banter faded as we became lost in the dance, bound by invisible threads.

His hand lingered on my arm as I felt the heat of his touch through the fabric, and my pulse sped up. Each time he spun me, his gaze found mine. When he pulled me in close, our bodies touched more than needed. As his hands gripped my waist to spin me, he took his time releasing me as if he didn't want to let me go. The warmth of his hands nearly burned me as my pulse quickened and my mouth ran dry. I felt my tongue dart out to wet my lips, and he watched it as if he were more interested in my tongue than the dance.

As the last notes faded, our eyes locked once again. The air between us shimmered with unspoken possibilities. In that suspended moment, I saw past Lore's stubborn arrogance to the man within, as bright and heartbreaking as a star flickering in darkness. A man I was now realizing had so many complex layers. Layers that were dangerous to me in ways I wasn't ready to admit.

Lore pulled me close, our breaths mingling. His stormy gaze searched my face, lingering on my lips. Need flashed in his eyes, and his desire lay bare.

My heart stuttered as his hand rose, fingers trailing along my jaw. His rough thumb brushed my bottom lip, drawing a gasp. My lips parted, and I swayed into him. A man who one minute said mean and cruel things and in the next saved my life.

The way he held my gaze, there was a longing fueled by bitter loneliness that matched my own dark and lonely soul. I stepped back, not wanting to feel any sort of connection to him, but his eyes held mine as if I couldn't dare look away.

As we stood breathless and staring at one another, Lore's face took on an odd look. He reached up to caress my cheek, his rough hands gently tracing my jaw. Heat passed over his gaze, and his eyes turned hooded and intense. He leaned in as if he were going to kiss me.

Just as I was ready to accept it and leaned my head back and my eyes fluttered closed, I felt him pull back as he paused at the last second. Leaving me confused and wanting a kiss from a man I knew nothing about. I let out a disappointed exhale.

I shouldn't have been disappointed; I shouldn't have wanted his touch, yet the idea of his hands on my body sent thrills through me. That all changed with his following words.

His voice lowered and changed to steel. "You know," he began as he came close again. "I've danced this only once before, which I'm assuming is your namesake, Queen Isabella."

My eyes widened, but I quickly clamped down my expression, using a strategic glare to hide my surprise. Queen Isabella had been my father's mother. She had ruled the Vampire Court for more than a millennia before an uprising had led to her death more than five hundred years prior. My father was the youngest of her children, and he'd honored her by naming me after her, which had angered his brother, the king.

It was considered unbecoming and an insult to name a weak half-human child after the greatest vampire queen to ever live. I'd never known the queen I'd been named after, but I bet her feelings were mutual, especially since it had been my fault the Vampire Court had crumbled.

There were many who honored the old queen, from peasants to humans and even secret little half-breed princesses. A similar name didn't tie me to her; only my blood did.

"My father thought if he named me after her, it would help them accept me," I said through my teeth.

"Did it?"

I moved my head from side to side as my lips pressed tightly together. A deafening silence pressed in on me as we stood so close yet so far apart.

"Of course, when I knew her, she was just Princess Isabella," he admitted as we brushed up close.

I pulled my hands from his and stared at him, abruptly stopping the dance. That had been a very long time ago.

"How long have you been here?" I asked the same question that had been evaded once again.

He ignored me again. "So you don’t know much about her? Most royalty in the Vampire Court erases the history of the last reigning royal to begin their reign anew. Unless…" He studied me.

In my mind, I finished for him: *unless you were a part of the family.* Yet, I pressed my lips tightly together.

His gaze moved around my face. "I hadn't noticed before the similarities between you two. I only noticed that you have the same name. But I see it now."

"See what?" I breathed, afraid of the answer. I knew from experience that admitting this to him gave him more power than I was willing to give.

Lore stilled, his body changing in an instant as if something lethal overcame him. A darkness clouded his features as something old and primal looked out. An entity looked out through his eyes, something that craved death, something carved from suffering and pain. Something that looked at me with the kind of unfiltered hatred that made me shrink back. With just one look, it promised sweet vengeance.

Lore's expression darkened, his eyes flashing with unchecked fury. "Your Queen Isabella took everything from me. She ripped my sister, Lara, from my life when she was just becoming a young woman."

I took an involuntary step back, shaken by the venom in his voice. "What are you talking about?"

He advanced on me with his hands clenched. "Queen Isabella pretended to be my friend. Invited us to the Vampire Court under the illusion that we would create alliances. My kingdom sent me, and my sister came with me despite my arguments. While we were dining, her forces invaded my kingdom. She’d slaughtered my people and captured my sister, releasing me to carry the news of my failure home. She started the war between our people when she returned my sister broken. It wasn't long after that, Lara took her own life." Raw pain cracked in his voice as his lips curled, flashing me his teeth as if he wanted to tear me to pieces with them.

My mind reeled. I wanted to defend my family's honor, but the rage and grief etched on Lore's face gave me pause. I had never cared for or had any real loyalty to my vampire family, but it felt wrong to tarnish her name.

"She was just protecting her people," I said, but the excuse felt hollow.

Lore laughed bitterly. "Protecting vampires by destroying dragons? Your people were murderers."

"And yours were saints?" I shot back. "I know the stories—your dragons razed villages to the ground!"

"Only after the vampires drew first blood." Lore towered over me. "Face it, your beloved queen was a monster."

"We are all monsters," I whispered, and Lore shot forward, crushing my body to his as he took those very teeth and trailed them along my neck in a way that should have frightened me. Only, it had the opposite effect. A shiver of pleasure arched my back into him, and a noise that sounded like a moan escaped my lips.

His breath cascaded across my neck until he reached my ears, and then he whispered low and sensual, which was so at odds with his words, "You are the monster—a vampire, and a wanton one at that."

I trembled with barely contained fury, blinking back tears I refused to shed. The air between us became charged with heat, our faces inches apart. A reckless desire to grab and shake him clashed with an equally intense longing to crush my lips to his. I dug my nails into my palms, overwhelmed and confused. Why did I feel this way? One moment, I had intense emotions to murder him, then the next, it was as if they made me a mad woman bound on a path of destruction.

With a growled curse, Lore spun away, separating us. "This conversation is pointless," he hissed. "We are enemies, and we always will be."

I watched the rigid set of his shoulders as he strode away, willing my heart to harden against this complicating attraction. "Good riddance," I muttered. Despite my bravado, a small, traitorous part of me mourned the loss of what we could have shared. I pushed it down ruthlessly, clinging to old hatreds...and trying in vain to ignore new desires. With a last scorching glance, I whirled away.

This was my first real dance with a man who would always be my enemy. It was my dumb luck to be trapped in a cursed castle with him, and

I feared it would be an eternity before I could escape. That just wouldn't do.

After Lore stormed off, I stood, deep breaths heaving from my chest, my mind spinning. I needed answers about my grandmother's actions, but I also couldn't shake my conviction that Lore must die to break this curse.

CHAPTER 12

Bella

Determined to uncover the truth, I wandered the dusty halls of Lore's castle, searching for clues about his family and their downfall. If I could find his sister Lara's diary, it might shed light on the curse that now imprisoned Lore.

I wandered into the east end, where the forgotten room had been the day I'd first arrived. Alysha had warned me not to go there because only ghosts and monsters lurked there. I sighed, finding nothing in the room. I left, the feeling of eyes watching me prickling across my skin, and sought my answers elsewhere.

I followed my instinct further down the hall to what I suspected was Lara's room. Something forbidden awaited me in the shadows, where the daylight seemed to melt away to the dreary oppression of things hidden.

After searching, I found a hidden door leading to a small room lined with books. This must have been Lara's secret sanctuary. I quickly located her diary and scanned the pages until I found her description of the curse being enacted.

I scanned the fraying spines until I found a journal titled *Lara's Memoirs*. With trembling fingers, I opened it. Lara spoke of love and hope in her early entries, admitting she had fallen in love but not naming the person who had captured her heart. Later, her entries turned to the sting of betrayal and heartbreak. She described her terror when the vampire queen invaded, stealing dragon children. Her words were heavy and dark, as if she refused to believe it was happening. Each entry became darker as the

hopeful girl who blossomed with newfound love disappeared. Someone distant, sad, and broken wrote detached words that soon turned into words of pain and anguish that squeezed my heart to read them.

Later entries turned angry, detailing plans of vengeance. The final page was stained with tears—Lara had scratched out a curse directed at the vampires, aiming to give Queen Isabella the same heartbreak and betrayal she felt. There was a confession on the last page.

I loved her. I loved her with everything that I had, and I was. She took that love until I was empty, and she rewarded it with betrayal. She gave me my heart back, and all that was left were broken little pieces of what it once was. It will never be beaten again. Because it was only ever meant to win for her. Though she confessed her own love and tore her heart out to show it beat for me, in the same breath, she told me a queen could not love another. Love was a weakness. As she handed me her heart, she admitted she would never love another. She betrayed me. Here I am without her, and I am nothing. So I will become nothing. If anyone ever finds this letter, know I never meant for any of it to happen.

Darkness is coming. It rides on the wind like a raven in the night, but I won't be here to see it. Because my sacrifice comes here and now, but there is more I fear coming.

I sank to the floor, mind reeling—thinking of how my grandmother confessed her love to Lore's sister.

My eyes roamed over the dusty furnishings, lingering on a small wooden chest tucked away on a shelf. Intricate carvings of vines and flowers adorned the sides, framing a heart etched lovingly into the center. I stepped closer, fingers brushing years of cobwebs as they curled around the lid. With a gentle tug, the chest creaked open, revealing a shriveled lump nestled inside. It was small enough to fit in my palm, dried and withered from the passage of centuries. The leathery surface was cracked with age; its former vibrant red faded to a lifeless brown. I pictured my grandmother, young and heartbroken, placing this organ to rest with shaking hands. How many lonely nights had she cried herself to sleep, separated from her love by cruel circumstances? I stroked the fossilized heart with pity, this relic of centuries-old lost romance.

I only hoped they had found peace together. It was clear the actions after Lara's capture by Queen Isabella prompted the events that led to the curse. Lore and his people had retaliated, and the moon goddess had sided

with the vampires, interfering where goddesses should not. As a result, Lore had attacked a witch's village, killing the moon goddess's half-mortal daughter. How the moon goddess had retaliated was not mentioned in the journal, as I suspected the aftermath was yet to be enacted when the end of Lara's tale came to fruition. The curse had likely been created by Lore's actions against the moon goddess since we all knew she could be a cruel, vindictive deity.

For the first time, an idea came to me. What if this curse was a way to restore my father to the vampire throne. To make up for whatever slight Nyx decided against my family. Perhaps because of my family's intertwined past was why I was here. Breaking the curse would release Lore and me from this centuries-long curse that, in its own way, was hanging over both of our heads. When my father reclaimed his throne, he'd no longer need me. I could live a life free of him.

I left the hidden room, leaving the journal and the shriveled heart to the dust and the past. My mind was a whirling mess of thoughts and emotions. I needed to find something that spoke of the curse after Lara's involvement. At least now I understood why Lore's hatred of me went so deep.

The haunting chill of the east wing faded as I wandered into a warmer, well-lit hall. Rich tapestries and polished wood paneling replaced the cobwebs and dust. My numb fingers tingled as I drew nearer to the crackling fireplace, its flames dancing brightly against the cold stone. Through the towering, mullioned windows, the sun sank below the distant hills in a blaze of color. Fiery orange and fuchsia melted together, deepening to vivid purples as twilight crept in. Wispy clouds floated overhead, stained crimson by the sunset.

I watched, mesmerized, as the inflamed sun dipped lower, bathing the land in its intense golden light. Shadows lengthened as the final loving rays reached out to embrace the earth one last time before reluctantly releasing it to the fast-approaching night. The fading light filled the land with diffused warmth, the grass turning bronze. Shadows stretched and yawned as day yielded to night. Slowly, radiant azure deepened into a seductive navy before darkness descended utterly, taking the last lingering notes of color until morning.

I turned and took in the room, my awe from the setting sun gone as the chill crept in from the night. It was a library—but not just any library—the

most glorious one I'd ever seen. Wall-to-wall books seemed to go on forever, several levels high, and I stood glued to the spot in amazement. I pinched myself, stifling a cry, confirming I was not dreaming.

Towering bookshelves made of a cherry wood color stacked with books of every shape and size could be seen in every available area. Occasionally, a few windows broke up the stacks, leaving perfectly cushioned seats as if beckoning the readers to simultaneously stop and enjoy the beauty of two worlds. Both in reality and between the pages.

I moved toward an enormous fireplace that made me nervous, burning so close to so many beautiful books. The fire looked like it needed stoking. The night I'd rushed into the forbidden woods came back to me. I'd been clutching the book in my hands. I'd managed to hold onto it as I ran through the woods, and then I'd lost it.

As I glided into the room on a comfy chair near the fire, the book sat, still stained with blood. The title's red embossing glowed in the firelight. I picked it up, running my hand over its surface. This book had been the catalyst for all my troubles. My eyes flicked to the fire, and, for a moment, I considered chucking the book into it. I couldn't bring myself to do it. So I sat it back down. I had a task. Gather intel on the curse, escape this place, and finally be able to live without fear. With a sigh, I assessed the room again, and dread sank in my stomach this time.

The room was impressive, and I loved it, but it also meant it would take me forever to find anything in it. It was huge, and I could spend weeks in it and never even find what I was looking for. I groaned, gently running my hands through my hair and pulling the strands. I could do this. I had nothing but time. So I walked the aisles of books, running my finger down the spines and trying to decipher the catalog system. I soon realized there wasn't one. Which made my job much harder.

"This is ridiculous!" After hours of studying the titles, I finally said to the crackling fire, a lone candle flickering across each one. I pushed further into the library, where the room became chillier, and found another room in the back. A bed with rumpled sheets and a wardrobe occupied the whole room. It was clearly a man's room.

Men's clothing was strewn in a few areas, and masculine touches of dark blues and blacks were adorned everywhere. It had to have been Lore's. Alastair didn't strike me as the type to make a bedroom in a library. I suspected he slept near or with Alysha from how they acted around each

other. Next to the bed was a shelf full of journals. I stared at the shelf for a long moment, debating whether I wanted to be the kind of person who snooped on someone's thoughts. I was sure Lore would hate me even more if he found me reading his journals. I needed answers and a way out to break this curse so I could leave.

"I don't care if the dragon boy likes me," I said into the shadows of the night. A pang of guilt still struck me as I snatched up the first journal, which appeared older and yellow, the pages brittle and aged.

I gingerly opened it, careful of its delicate nature. Whether I wanted to admit it or not, deep down, I did care. That feeling of heavy lead set deep in my stomach, refusing to go away as I read his inner thoughts.

She's gone, and Father has sent me to war in her absence. I've done unthinkable things on his orders. Things I am ashamed of. Things that will haunt me until the day I die. I have blood on my hands. The blood of innocents. I've become a monster.

I stopped reading, feeling this was too private to continue, and scanned the book until the end, looking for something to help me. I found it.

Like a storm cloud, she burst through the front doors during the spring solstice ball. With a flick of her wrist, everyone froze, unable to move. She marched with a deadly purpose. Her gaze was so thick with vengeance and hatred that it clawed its way up my throat as if it were manifested physically. Her pale hair streamed out around her as she stood before the throne, her clawed hands pointing toward the king and queen with malicious intent.

I should have known, and I should have moved faster, but I was too entranced. She was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen.

"I do not beseech you mortals and your petty wars. When you take one of mine from me, then you must pay." Pain flashed in the creature's dark gaze, and her eyes became as pitch black as the night. It was then I realized this was no woman. This was a goddess—and not just any goddess: it was Nyx, the moon goddess.

She twisted her hair, a sadistic smile warping her perfect features. "Your kingdom will suffer for more years than a person should live, trapped in a state between the living and the dead. As the world outside passes you by, you will all be forgotten," she sang.

She spun around and danced across the floor as we watched in horror, frozen in place by the celestial power.

She sang in a high-pitched voice that turned soft and mocking before her lips twisted into a wicked grin. "You took my daughter." She pointed her finger at me. "So I'll take everything from you."

She looked to the king and queen frozen on their thrones and began to weave the curse that changed everything. "Every curse needs a way to break it," she said at the end, "though you never will. But I like to dangle a little hope above your head while you suffer. To break the curse, the dragon prince must willingly sacrifice his heart."

The guards rushed forward to stop her, and without even looking at them, she threw them and half the room back with her magic. Like the rest of the castle, she froze the throne room and moved toward the dais. I stood frozen, unable to move, as I watched her finish twisting her dark magic.

"You will be forgotten, even by your sun goddess, my sister, Allora. You will lose everything." She turned to me. "Unless he who took what is most dear can take the life of his one true love, or die by her hand."

Her gaze met mine, and in her starry night eyes, I saw all that was to come: the hopelessness I would feel all those years, the hope that would never come, and the despair I would countless times fall into. How can one even find a way to break a curse such as this? I was alone. No one was coming—not my true love, not anyone. I would die here and my kingdom with it.

A raging storm brewed in my head, screaming for her to stop because we had suffered enough. My sister was dead. The beautiful, deadly creature before me smiled bitterly. "You will suffer the most, for it was you who took her life from me. You who cannot love. It is you that will spend years living with your pain and regret only to end it with the worst agony ever known. To take the life of the one you hold most dear."

With a flick of her wrist, everyone vanished, gone from this world. Before she left, she ensured the king and queen would never live again, even if the curse broke. With her magic, she ripped them apart, leaving them in pieces.

I gasped as I slammed the journal shut harder than I had meant to. I shoved it back into place and left, shaking my head as I went. I was truly stuck here then. The only way to break the curse was to kill Lore or for him to kill his one true love. A plan began to formulate. One that would end with my dagger in his heart. Because I wasn't going to wait around forever. He had to die.

Footsteps outside the door startled me. I blew out my candle and crouched in the shadows, afraid Lore would find and confront me. The steps faded.

In the darkness, I weighed everything I thought I knew. I had blamed Lore, but now doubt gnawed at me. To escape this curse, I would need to betray the man who had saved me from wolves—or be stuck here with the rest of them. The choice seemed impossible. With a heavy heart, I slipped from the room, the books' secrets burning inside me.

I heard the dragon's roar that night, and my feet pulled me from bed, clad only in my sheer nightgown. I found my way through the dark and haunted halls of the castle as if pulled toward the monster, the beast that waited for me outside. I knew I should be scared—any sane person would be terrified—but my feet refused to listen to my head.

Soon, I stood underneath the moonlight as a crimson dragon soared overhead. Seeing me, it landed, rumbling the ground with its weight. I stood still, unsure if I should move forward. My body wanted to pull me in the direction of the beast. My mind was telling me this was insane. I should be running. Yeah, maybe the dragon liked me and even cared for me in some odd way. It was a beast, and it could decide to make me a tasty snack at any moment.

I didn't have to decide because soon, the massive dragon made its way to me. His scales glowed like fire in the moonlight. I thought I'd be shivering from the chill, but the closer the beast came, the warmer I felt the heat radiating off his body. The beast—Lore, no doubt—now stood within chomping distance of me as he slowed, then tilted his face down until it was level with my own.

I closed my eyes, not particularly in the mood to watch myself being burned alive and then eaten because I had some dumb notion that this beast and I had a connection.

No, I was crazy and about to be devoured. The dragon just stood there as if waiting.

I opened one eye and gazed into his fiery red eyes. The dragon stood unnaturally still. I realized the castle, its curse, and everything else absolutely bonkers in this world were connecting. I thought I heard a voice in my head calling out my name. *Isabella.*

"I'm crazy!" I yelled into the night and into the face of the beast standing before me. "It's official, I've gone insane." I paused as I heard a

deep laugh. The dragon in front of me was shaking in a way that would indicate laughter. At that, I listened, almost wishing I hadn't.

You are mine, a deep voice said in my head. The dragon, Lore, turned and took to the sky. As his mighty wings lifted him into the air and the wind pushed me back, I thought I heard a softer, *forever*.

Absolute terror shot through me. I was a prisoner.

CHAPTER 13

Bella

The following day, my stomach demanded I fill it. Alysha had left me, for the most part, alone. I suspected she wanted to give me time to adjust and not push me into anything too early. She seemed to see and understand more than people gave her credit for, and she knew I'd need to come to her. So I did.

My stomach grumbled the entire journey to the kitchen. I stopped at the door, and the smell of eggs, bacon, and hot bread hit me full force. My mouth watered, but it was my traitorous belly that gave it away as it announced itself in the loudest of ways. My lips pressed together in annoyance as Alysha's bright blue gaze lifted to mine.

"Good morning!" she said, a warm smile stretching across her face.

I felt all my annoyance melt away. I nodded in response, then tentatively walked into the room. The smell was glorious. I was practically salivating.

She gave me a knowing smile and quickly ordered a plate of food. It was eggs and bacon again, steaming high and with a heavy helping of vegetables on the side. The fragrant smell of herbs made my mouth water. "Sit and eat," she said, handing me the plate. I began shoveling food in my mouth before my bottom even met the chair's hardwood.

"Thank you," I mumbled around a mouthful of food.

"You're as bad as my son," she teased. "Always too busy to eat until he is half starved."

"Sorry." I finally remembered my manners.

Once upon a time, I had them either beaten into me by others in the Vampire Court or lovingly taught to me by my mortal nursemaid, Nan. Now, I had lost all the civility she had taught me to become the feral creature I now was. The shame hit me hard.

"Don't be sorry. It's been far too long since you've eaten. I'm surprised you didn't down three bowls again." She sat before me, taking a piece of bread for herself and passing me a cup of something warm and steaming. "We don't have coffee, I'm afraid."

I took the tea and sipped it. It was perfect. A dash of milk and lightly sugared just the way I liked it. I almost moaned into the cup.

"Where do the eggs and bacon come from?" I asked as I shoveled the remaining bits of food into my mouth. I devoured another plate, but after my first trip to the kitchen, I realized it was best to ease into a more significant meal consumption. Not that I cared if I barfed on Dragon Boy's shoes again.

"The bacon is brought in from wild boars that…" She trailed off, studying me as if wondering what to say.

"That the dragon brings you?" I pushed my empty plate away and lifted the cup to my mouth. I turned it to sip around a chip in the porcelain of the teacup.

She nodded before continuing, "We find that every day our pantry and fridge are replenished with the same stuff we had the day of…" She trailed off, biting her lip. "Well, unfortunately, that day we had an abundance of chicken and other fowl." She chuckled. "Gods, I'm so tired of chicken."

I studied her, absorbing every detail of her face, from the stubborn curve of her delicate chin to the plumpness of her mouth to her overly large eyes. She was beautiful—too beautiful to be a kitchen girl. "What were you before all of this?" I asked.

She opened her mouth, closed it, and exhaled before squaring her shoulders. "I was a maid. I didn't have to clean anything in the castle because I wasn't just a maid."

"You said you were a widow. Was Billy's father caught up in the curse?" I blew on the tea before taking a sip. I knew I was interrogating her, but I needed answers.

"Yes, but my husband had long been dead by then." She pulled back the warmth from earlier, cooling from her expression. She became more guarded.

My mind reeled off. What if Alysha was Lore's true love and their son was Billy? I had noted a slight resemblance between the two when I'd seen them in the kitchen together. It was the same shape as their face and the tilt of their eyes. I suspected if they smiled, it'd be the same as well. He couldn't have been born during the curse because this place was locked in time, unchanging. I chewed on my lip, debating this information.

An odd feeling stirred inside of me. A feeling I couldn't name or decipher, but when I thought of Alysha and Lore together, it didn't sit well with me. It made me feel angry. Which was madness.

She leaned forward, putting her face in her hands. "You'd think all these years later it would get easier, but it doesn't." She took a deep breath, lifted her head, and locked eyes with me. "I was his mistress."

I gulped that heavy feeling of lead in my gut, hitting me again as I sat there.

"You were Lore's mistress?" I asked, my heart sinking for reasons I didn't understand. I didn't care. I couldn't care. I didn't even know these people. Yet, I felt the tinge of jealousy tainting my emotions. This place was turning me mad.

She laughed so loud she threw her head back. "Gods no!"

I waited as she got a hold of herself, unsure what she meant.

"I was the king's mistress. The reason Billy and I were in the basement cellar is because the queen locked his dirty little secrets down there the night of the spring solstice with the intention that we would disappear in the morning. Because the king wanted to leave her to be with me."

I chewed on that. That explained why Billy and Lore held a family resemblance. "Why would she do that?"

"She had just lost her daughter and she thought she was about to lose her crown." Alysha shrugged as if that explained it.

"But she wasn't?"

She shook her head. "I had no intention of becoming Queen. As I had no intention of remaining his mistress."

"When a king wants something, you aren't allowed to say no," a deep voice said from behind her. Alastair walked into the room and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. He looked down at her with eyes full of love. Alysha grasped his hand and met his loving gaze with her own.

"So you're stuck here now," I added. "Together."

"It's not as bad as all of that. Lore is a good man and has never held it against me. Plus, for many years, we only had each other. We're…" Alysha drifted off as if thinking deeply about it before finally answering, "A family."

"The curse, tell me about it." As soon as *curse* left my mouth, the room became tense, and my lips pressed together.

"That is not our tale to tell," Alastair said, his eyes turned guarded, and Alysha nodded in agreement.

Which meant it was Lore's.

"The dragon—it is Lore, isn't it?" I asked. I had assumed all this time, but no one had confirmed it.

"It is," Alysha said sadly, wringing her hands together. "Though you won't see the dragon during the day. We all find it best to stay indoors once the sun goes down. We know his dragon would never harm us. It's just a precaution."

I opened my mouth to ask why they would need to be cautious, but Billy burst into the room excitedly—something I noticed was his habit. His gaze took in the room.

"There's a new groundhog!" he exclaimed. His shining face turned to me as if I was the bringer of the groundhog. "We haven't seen one in so long. I spotted it in the garden."

"Are animals and birds not common here?" I asked, reflecting on our conversation about where the meat came from. They had chickens that appeared magically every day as if the day reset itself. I'd read a similar story. Once upon a time, a witch had cursed a man to relive the same day repeatedly—until he went mad. I shivered at the thought, realizing it was much like the curse here, only there were some changes.

I believed the original curse was meant to leave him forever alone. How did she expect him to break a curse if his true love wasn't even here? I stared at Alysha. Unless she was his true love and her being here was orchestrated on purpose. In that case, the curse had indeed backfired if, all these years later, they had yet to break it.

Billy's excited announcement cut straight to my core. His sapphire eyes shone bright with hope, pleading for me to join him. An infectious grin split his cherubic face, revealing his missing tooth. His childlike joy and optimism were irresistible. I found myself helpless against the power

of his enthusiasm. After a lifetime starved of friendship, how could I deny this sweet boy?

"I'd be delighted," I heard myself say, even as my mind spun with unanswered questions.

Billy needed a playmate more than I needed solutions to this confounding puzzle. His loneliness resonated within me like a sorrowful refrain. How many endless days and nights had I longed for a companion to ease my isolation?

Billy eagerly yanked my hand, pulling me into the midday sun's searing golden rays. I blinked against the sudden brightness as he led me to the garden, a patchwork of herbs and vegetables nestled against the castle walls.

"Oh shoot, he's gone!" Billy's crestfallen face crumpled in disappointment as he searched in vain for the elusive groundhog. His chin dipped, and he fought back tears, still valiantly trying to force his smile back into place.

My heart ached at his dejection. What fresh tragedy to be severed entirely from nature's living, breathing cycle. It had to feel like an island cut off from the tides of life, trapped in stagnation. I wanted to gather him into my arms, to shelter him from the unfathomable isolation.

Instead, I murmured reassurances and pointed out the telltale holes pockmarking the otherwise pristine soil. Proof that we were not entirely forsaken. Billy latched onto this lifeline hungrily, explaining how the animals had vanished when the curse fell. His wisdom belied his tender years, honed from endless empty days with only himself for company. The thought sank like a stone in my belly.

He was sure my arrival had changed things, ushering in new life to disrupt the status quo. Perhaps he was right; I was the catalyst for this curse's end. At what cost? Lore's blood on my hands? Billy's trusting eyes turning cold with betrayal? Impossible choices loomed before me, but at that moment, I brushed aside the shadows and clung to the light in Billy's smile.

For now, it was enough.

CHAPTER 14

Bella

It was late in the afternoon when I found him. He stood with his back to me in an armory just inside the courtyard. Alastair was with him, and they had both peeled off their shirts. The cool air hinted at the coming warmth of spring, a stark difference from the winter chill outside this castle. In the shifter village, it was the beginning of winter. Here, it was spring.

Despite the cool air, Lore was glistening with sweat. He lowered an axe and picked up a sword. Alastair turned toward me, a smile on his face. Yet I darted behind the wall and peeked out to avoid being seen.

I watched from around the castle wall like I was ashamed to be seen. His body, too, was a work of art. It was Lore's that held me mesmerized. His back was toned with lean muscle. The curve of his back disappeared into a well-formed muscular behind. Scars from battles littered his exposed skin, with a particularly gruesome one across his back that marred the perfect golden tone of his skin.

I tore my gaze away, conflicting feelings bubbling to the surface as I reminded myself that he saw me as his enemy, and I was contemplating killing him. It was complicated.

"So this new development must be a shock," Alastair said. "You seem out of sorts about it—more tense than usual. Are you thinking about her?" Alastair pivoted at the last moment, nearly missing the sword's swing.

"It's…" Lore trailed off breathlessly as he swung again, connecting once with Alastair's sword before he continued, "It's disturbing."

"I don't see how a beautiful woman is disturbing," Alastair said, his brow furrowing in concentration as he anticipated Lore's next strike. They were like two dancers synchronized to each other's moves, something developed from their time together.

"I worry," Lore admitted but said nothing until Alastair lifted a thick dark brow, waiting. "I worry about her safety," Lore said with a huff.

"Why is that?" Alastair asked, knowing full well I was there and saying nothing.

"You know why." Lore turned, his body twisting and lunging in a move that dropped my mouth open. It was like watching perfection—the flawlessly honed warrior in his element fighting as if it were second nature. "I worry she will get hurt."

"By what?" Alastair asked, quieter than before, as if he hadn't expected the conversation to go in that direction and now wanted to shield me from it.

"By me," he said, and though I couldn't see his face, I heard the warble in his voice, the strain of it that held fear in it. "By the curse."

"You think it could be her?" Alastair asked slowly and carefully, his gaze trained on Lore. I knew he watched me in his peripheral vision.

"Anything is possible, but I doubt it." He swung his sword again, and Alastair moved so that Lore could turn his body my way. His eyes landed on me, and he froze momentarily so Alastair could bring his sword dangerously close to Lore's skin. "The curse is to be broken by the one I love. And I don't love her." His cold gaze fixed on me as he said the words as if hoping to hurt me with the statement.

"Not yet," Alastair added. "But there is something there you can't deny." Lore remained quiet, and I wished I could see his expression. It was the revelation that he had someone meant for him, and I was not it.

He had a destined true love like some fairytale. The thought clawed its way up my throat, threatening to choke me. I had no claim over him, yet the idea of Lore belonging to another woman sent jealousy spiking through me like thorns. What if she was out there somewhere, fated to break this curse? Where did that leave me—the inconvenient complication?

I let out a muffled yelp, but the blade stopped mere centimeters from his skin.

All my thoughts were forgotten, all the fears and the questions that arose as the panic lanced through me and my gaze locked with his.

Clearly, neither knew I heard them, again discounting my vampire heritage.

When he turned fully toward me, giving me his chest completely on display, I felt my mind utterly empty as my gaze traveled over every hard plane of his chest. My lips parted. His dark auburn hair fell over his eyebrows, begging to be brushed back. When my eyes finally met Lore's again, he was smirking.

Heat flooded my cheeks as a warmth spread through my body. Goddess, he was glorious. I realized belatedly I was staring. Embarrassment spread through me. "I—I, uh." Words failed me, and my discomfort grew heavier in my chest as I turned to flee.

"Wait!" he called after me. "Do you know how to use a sword?"

I turned slowly, confused by his question. "What?"

"A sword. Do you know how to use it?"

"I know the basics, but I'm sorely out of practice."

Fencing had been important to learn at a young age. My training had not been extensive, and what little I had had only been a few years with the clumsy movements of a child. But my father, when I amused him, insisted I learn in case one of his people decided to make me a snack.

"What are you good at?" Lore stepped forward, his brow lifting as if he doubted my skill.

"I'm fairly good."

Daggers were easy; just stick them with the pointy side. Worked every time. The bow—I'd used that on the rare occasion I could sneak off to hunt on days when I couldn't stomach the pain of hunger any longer. The first moment I'd taken a life, it had broken something inside of me. It had just been a squirrel, but it still pained me to this day to think I'd taken the poor, helpless creature's life to feed myself.

Animals were a gift—even squirrels. I was thankful for its sacrifice that kept me alive. They did taste rather good, even if I ate guiltily.

"I suspect you are also good at using your mouth in a fight as well," Lore commented with a twitch of his lips.

"I beg your pardon?"

Alastair snorted, clearly holding back a laugh. I glared at him.

"You talk your opponent to death until they give up." Lore shrugged, turning to once again grab a sword. He chucked one to me as well. "Alastair was on his way out and I'm in need of more training. Join me?"

"Pass," I deadpanned, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Oh, come on. I know you are itching to use that mouth on me. This is your chance to…" He trailed off as if searching for the correct term. "Torture and interrogate me."

It was my turn to snort. "Suit yourself. It's *your* funeral."

"I'll be on my way then," Alastair commented, his lips pressed together as he suppressed his smile. He turned and walked off while shaking his head.

"I thought you hated me and wanted me to stay away from you." I paused, testing the sword's weight in my hand as we walked out to the courtyard where they trained. "That I smelled of death… blah blah blah, you're my enemy and all that fun stuff. You worry I'll do something."

"All that fun stuff?" He raised a thick eyebrow in question. "And no, I worry for you. There is a difference."

"You hate vampires. I'm half-vampire." *And more your enemy than you realize,* I thought, remembering my grandmother was the reason for his sister's death.

"I may have acted out of turn back then. I wasn't expecting…." He paused, eyeing me. "You."

"What do you mean you weren't expecting me?" I demanded, getting into position as I faced him from a safe distance. "You brought me here."

"No, my dragon brought you here."

"One and the same, buddy." I dipped into the stance needed, already feeling the heaviness of the sword. This would be over quickly and not end in my victory.

Lore moved closer to me, adjusting my hips to make my stance firm and unyielding before he leaned down and whispered, "Not anymore."

His words fell flat. He backed off quickly as if aware that he had lingered, touching me far too long, but I didn't catch the intensity of his stare, even as his words were sad. I turned my face and studied him, waiting for him to begin. As I digested his words, a realization hit me.

"You are cut off from him," I stated, and Lore nodded in confirmation, getting into his own defensive stance as he prepared to strike.

"So your dragon brought me here and you were against it when you found out." Again, I said it as more of an observation. "Well, that's precisely…" I paused, feeling the disappointment deeper than I should, "peachy."

I shouldn’t feel disappointed, and I shouldn’t feel anything but irritation for him. Although I was very irritated by this whole ordeal, I had come to think that perhaps I was his one true love. I’d still have to kill him, but the thought of having true love—well, it felt nice—tragic but nice.

“Yes,” he said before thrusting forward, catching me off guard. As his sword connected with mine, I automatically dropped it.

“Fuck!” I yelled, fighting the desire to stomp my foot. “I didn’t expect that to happen so fast.”

“Your upper body strength is weak. To survive here, you'll need to work on that," he commented dryly. "That mouth of yours too. It says such naughty words."

I pressed my lips together, grinding my teeth as I imagined him impaled on the sword I'd dropped like a fool. Suddenly, the idea of killing him didn't seem all that bad. I smirked at the thought.

"I thought you liked my mouth?"

"Liked is one hell of an exaggeration, don't you think?" he said as I picked up the sword. "I'm sure we could find a use for it."

I turned to stare at him, but Lore suddenly sputtered, embarrassment coloring his face as red spread across his cheeks and ears. "I meant—uhm, in battle to distract the enemy."

He tilted his head back and grimaced before running his hand down his face with his free hand.

"What enemy?" I looked around pointedly to indicate the dissolution of the mostly deserted castle. At one time, I was sure hundreds had worked here. Now, there were only four people who now lived the same day over and over again.

“You’ll see.” Lore’s face still flushed, studying me intently.

“Is this another one of those things you can’t tell me, like the rest of you?” I demanded, thrusting forward with the sword, putting him on the defensive this time.

I gripped my sword tightly, praying it wouldn't escape my grasp again. It held true as we met each other's blades and pushed against one another, but again, Lore was right. My lack of strength from too few muscles and the years of starvation meant I was no match for the warrior in front of me, even with him obviously taking it easy on me.

He pushed me back fast, taking me off balance as I fell backward and onto my ass in the dirt. The sword was once again out of my grasp. I went to curse again but clamped my lips together and glared at Lore. He offered his hand, but I ignored it, instead choosing to stand on my own. I brushed off the dirt and faced him again.

"You're a stubborn little thing, aren't you?" he asked as a hint of respect lit his cerulean gaze. As quickly as it was there, it was gone until I thought I'd imagined it.

"There are worse things to be, but I prefer the term persistent."

"Good. Then you need to listen. You're weak, so you'll need to rely on speed and agility. Fighting and sparring won't help you." He moved forward to take the sword from my hands, but I stepped back.

"One more time." I smirked, false bravado in my tone.

Five minutes later, I was once again in the dirt. This time, I took his offered hand. I told myself his bare chest had been a clever distraction because as I once again studied him, I noted the tight muscles of his abs and the dips on either side of his hips that led into a V to that area between his thighs hidden by his low-hanging pants. A trail of dark hair began just below his navel. Goddess, dammit, I was staring again!

As we put the weapons up, I felt it was finally the perfect time to get answers. "I was exploring the castle last night."

"Hmm," he said without opening his mouth, focusing on setting the weapons back up with almost obsessive tidiness as if their exact position mattered that much.

"And I stumbled into a room in the east wing of the castle."

Lore remained deadly still as a coldness seemed to wash over him. His voice had a hard sharpness that I wasn't expecting. It cut with each word. "What, pray tell, did you find?"

"A mosaic of paned glass telling a story. A young woman's room." And ghosts, I didn't add.

"You were in my sister's room?" His features darkened, and his gaze turned as cold as ice.

"Yes," I began hesitantly, pulling myself up straight and lifting my chin. I refused to let him intimidate me. I'd faced worse than his wrath. "Her name was Lara, right?"

He sighed as if just realizing his reaction. "It was."

"She died right before." I paused, sweeping my arms around the castle around us. "All of this."

"She did," he said through gritted teeth, the muscle in his jaw flexing from the tension.

"What is this curse on you all?" I asked, crossing my arms. I wasn't going to let him deflect and brush me off. Not this time.

"It's no concern of yours."

"You're wrong. It is my concern. I'm stuck here with you. I deserve to know." I moved directly in his way as he turned to leave. To run away. I wasn't going to let him. Not this time. "What is the curse?

My thoughts went back to his early statement that he had someone he was meant to be with, someone who was meant to break this curse. That wasn't me.

The narrowing of his eyes and the quick flash of his teeth was the only warning I had before he backed me up to the wall again. Slamming his hand next to my head with enough force that I felt the stone crack.

"It is none of your concern," he repeated with a growl that was anything but human. His eyes flashed to the same red I saw in the dragon's as he had stared at me in the cave.

As his warmth pressed into me and I stared up at him, my breath hitched, and I was panting for a whole other reason. Because as soon as his eyes changed, it was as if he had changed with it. There was heat in his gaze. A primal desire that burned and demanded to be released. The dragon staring back at me wanted nothing more than to release it on me.

"I thought you and your dragon were separate," I said breathlessly, tilting my head.

Lore leaned in and ran his nose along my neck, breathing deeply. His voice, still deep and primal, spoke close to my ear, sending shivers down my back and wetness to pool between my thighs. "We are separated but you—you have some kind of magic that pulls him—us to you."

His lips trailed across my jaw, and his hands moved to my body, caressing my sides as they moved up my waist and then lower. He grabbed me beneath my knees and wrapped my legs around him, slamming my back into the stone wall and trapping me there.

"You've bewitched my dragon."

With my legs around him, I felt the truth of that statement as something hard pressed into my center. And this primal urge was in me,

too, as I stared down at him. I hated him. I planned to kill him. Still, I wanted him.

I wasn't a virgin, nor was I innocent in any way, but my one experience with a man hadn't done much for me. The act had left me wanting and feeling used. It was also the only time I'd been kissed. The man had lifted my skirt and plowed into me from behind without a care if it was pleasurable to me. I'd never tried again. Nor had I wanted to.

This moment, in my enemy's arms—in Lore's arms—I realized I wanted him. I wanted to feel his lips against mine, yet I knew that if I succumbed to it, it would leave me ruined for anyone else. As if some part of me knew I'd be branded. Goddess, if I didn't want it.

Lore stared into my eyes with an intensity that matched my own. There was an unspoken passion in his gaze. We remained frozen here, both of us frozen and breathing heavily. My heart beat furiously in my chest.

At that moment, I wanted to give in to whatever was brewing between us. The desire was stronger than the voice of reason telling me I shouldn't. Just as that thought crossed my mind, Lore pulled back, his eyes no longer red.

As he looked at me, wariness was written across his face. He went rigid as I felt his body heat recede with his distance. The loss of his heat sent a chill across my overly warm body. We stood there for a moment, both of us breathless.

"You don't…" he panted as if he'd just returned from running. "You don't smell like death anymore. You smell like sunshine and lilacs." His voice was rough.

He turned and walked away, leaving me more confused than ever.

His dismissal cut cruelly, reopening the wounds left by a lifetime of rejection. Though I tried to cling to hatred, already this captor of mine had awakened longings I could no longer deny. I saw glimmers of humanity behind his brooding exterior. Allowing fondness for one's sworn enemy was the height of folly. No matter how my traitorous heart wavered, I could not forget Lore and I were destined to be apart.

CHAPTER 15

Bella

Weeks passed as we avoided each other and found other things to do in other castle areas. We only ran into each other once or twice before we quickly found other places to be. At night, after the sun dipped into the horizon, I heard his dragon roaring as if it called to me, and I desperately wanted to go to it. Only I couldn't risk it. I couldn't risk the havoc that would follow if I let myself get close to Lore.

I knew I wouldn't survive because we would kill each other—or something even more frightening—care for one another.

I found my way to the library, taking my quickly procured dinner. It had been days since I'd heard Lore's footsteps in the hallways and had hidden in an alcove until he had left, and even more days since we'd bumped awkwardly into each other in the hallway. Both of us had jumped back as if we had been burned before muttering about places we had to be as we fled.

I sighed, curling my legs beneath me as I looked out the window. The moon had already breached the sky, and the last tenders of blue sky that reminded me of Lore's eyes disappeared into the distance.

I scowled at the moon and cursed under my breath as I muttered, "Forget about him. He isn't important." But even the words felt hollow to my ears. I had escaped the others to find a quiet area because they reminded me of Lore every second of the day.

It was frustrating, to say the least. I couldn't trust this thing building between Lore and me. Not just because of the curse but, also, I refused to

hope for something or give in to emotions and feelings that could be used against me later.

Besides, it was utterly ridiculous to even be considering feelings when the man had literally taken me prisoner. Not to mention his awful personality. He was hot one minute and cold as the coldest winter night the next. No, I couldn't even fathom the almost kiss or the soft, gentle way he had touched me.

I had to focus on the curse and getting out of here. Yet, I kept thinking about the way his face changed for just a moment. As if all that ice had cracked, and he'd let me see for just a moment the man beneath it all. It sent a pang to my heart because I'd seen what he hid, and it was as sad and lonely as what I felt deep inside. It longed to be free just as I did.

I groaned, running a hand down my face and forcing these traitorous, sympathetic thoughts from my mind.

I stared at another kind of chicken stew, bread, and a steaming cup of tea. As the sun dipped low on the horizon, I prepared for a cozy evening in front of the fire with a book. The talk of curses and my encounter with Lore had my thoughts and emotions tangled. My hand had healed enough to take the bandage off, and the slathered poultice had healed faster than anything I'd seen as if there were magic in it.

Only an angry, jagged line remained where the vine's thorns had cut me, taking its blood sacrifice with it. I chuckled at my dark thoughts and then sat to eat my food. It had been so long since I'd had so many meals throughout the day. It was still hard to eat much without feeling sick. For the first time in a long time, my stomach no longer ached.

For that, I began to feel that maybe this wasn't such a bad deal after all—at least not for now. There were worse fates than being stuck in a magical cursed castle that fed me and kept me warm. I could easily get used to it—except that there was Lore.

I sighed, leaning back on the settee and staring into the warm fire that crackled nearby. Lore had created feelings I'd never had before. A desire that still made me warm to think about the way his hands had felt against me, the desire I had as his hard cock pressed into me, and the kiss that had destroyed me. Then there was his body…

"Goddess dammit!" I muttered to myself and the rows of books. I could not afford to allow my thoughts to go in that direction. I'd made up my mind to kill him. Hadn't I? A dark thought invaded my thoughts. What

better way to do that than to seduce him? You might as well have some fun in the meantime.

I grimaced. "If only it were that simple." I sighed. Because I knew if I succumbed to the passion that I knew existed between us, I'd lose a piece of myself I'd never get back. Especially when, one day, his true love showed up. If I didn't kill him before then.

The roar of the dragon in the distance suddenly had me sitting up. I remembered the red in his eyes and how the dragon had looked at me—gods, it was hot. Another roar sounded, only this time it was closer than I'd ever heard.

I stood up and moved toward the back of the library, past Lore's room, until I found the window. As the moonlight illuminated the land before me, a dragon high in the sky circling above me came into view. He was descending. Soon, he slammed into the ground close to the window and turned his head toward me as if he sensed me there.

So, I did precisely what Alysha told me not to do. I went outside.

He was massive, staring back at me with the same red eyes as earlier. He pushed his enormous snout into my body and breathed in before huffing. He proceeded to rub his face into me. His crimson scales were rough against my skin. I lifted my hand, unsure what to do, before placing it on his face… or snout. The dragon purred as I caressed it.

My finger trailed up his left horn, and he shuddered before huffing his hot breath on me as it fanned my hair.

The dragon stared at me with ancient crimson eyes as if trying to tell me something. I felt the pull toward him, the desire to spend all night by his side. Something in his nearness felt familiar as if I were being pulled to this creature that had saved me the night I had run into the forbidden woods with nothing but survival on my mind.

My savior said nothing as he nuzzled my hand with his scaly head as if he, too, was content to spend forever just like this. He huffed, turned, and, with a giant sweep of his wings, took off into the night sky, leaving me staring up at him in wonder as I wished I could fly right alongside him.

He hadn't spoken one word in my head or out loud, which made me think I was going crazy and had imagined his words from before.

I retreated back into the library, my mind a jumbled mess. Collapsing onto the settee, I stared blankly ahead, more confused than ever. My eyes landed on the small table before me, where I had abandoned Isla and

Adrian. Its crimson spine peeked out from beneath another book, beckoning to me. I reached for it with trembling fingers, the tale of a star-crossed vampire romance that had set me on this path.

As I cradled the book in my lap, I traced its gilded letters, recalling the hefty price I'd paid for this frivolous story. Loss of livelihood, fat hovel house, my father…which, in retrospect, wasn't much of a sacrifice now that I thought about it. Yet, I'd risked it to possess this fanciful fiction. What cruel irony that it led me to a castle cursed by true vampire betrayal.

I opened Isla and Adrian, its pages soft and worn beneath my touch. Losing myself in their epic tale of love conquering hatred, I felt the vice around my heart loosen. If only Lore would see me as more than his ancestral enemy. Even then, anything that bloomed between us would be doomed from the start because of the curse.

Exhaustion overwhelmed me as I read on into the night. I stifled a yawn, my eyelids growing heavy as lead. The fire's warmth enveloped me like a hypnotic lullaby, its flames dancing in twin pools of crimson blood. I imagined those fiery eyes guarding me as I drifted into slumber.

Just before oblivion claimed me, I thought I heard the dragon's faint call from afar, confirming that he would keep me safe and that I was his to protect. A traitorous part of me thrilled at the thought of belonging to him. The world faded to black.

Golden rays caressed my face, coaxing me awake. Blinking against the brightness cascading through the glass ceiling, I felt the scratchy weight of a blanket tucked around me. The fire had faded to ashes, and my book lay splayed open on the floor, its pages rumpled.

Had I dreamed of the dragon's nocturnal vow? I couldn't deny the magnetic pull I’d felt, even knowing his flames could end me in seconds. Yet some primal instinct insisted he would not harm me. I was his...for better or worse. The intensity of my yearning for him terrified and exhilarated me.

I burned to investigate Lore's inner sanctum, to see him unguarded in slumber. Like a moth to his flame, I was helplessly drawn. Still, I proceeded with caution down the shadowed corridor. My pounding heart betrayed my eagerness as I approached his bed chamber. The door stood slightly ajar, sunlight spilling through the crack. Hardly daring to breathe, I peered inside.

The man was exactly where I knew he would be—laid out flat on his back, his chest bare, and the golden bronze of his skin on full display. I studied his body's dips and valleys. My mouth watered.

He was perfect. At least his body was. The rest of him, well, he was an ass. I almost snorted at the thought. Instead, I held my breath, afraid to wake him from his slumber. My eyes drifted to the journals behind him, curious to know if, somewhere in there, the answers to my question could be found. How did I break the curse?

I took a tentative step into the door, letting out a slow exhale when nothing happened, and then I stepped further into the room. I thanked the gods. I was quiet but cursed myself for being a fool and even attempting this.

I made it to the bookcase, and just as my hand grasped a journal, the wood floor beneath my feet creaked, and I stilled. The room seemed to hold its breath as the air became thicker. I knew.

I knew pale blue eyes would be on me if I turned around. My hand dropped from the bookcase and the journal I had almost liberated.

Slowly, I turned. Only he wasn't in his bed anymore. His cerulean eyes stared penetratingly into mine, but he stood a breath away from me. He was not happy.

He slammed me back into the bookcase, a sharp pain shooting into my back as I cried out.

"I'm sorry, I just—"

"You just what. Decided to kill me in my sleep?"

"No," I gasped. His body pressed harder into mine, forcing an acute pain into my back. There was death in his eyes. My death.

"So you decided to steal from me, then?" His eyes flicked to the bookshelf and then back to me. His lips twisted into a snarl.

"No…" I trailed off. That had been exactly what I had been doing. I was such an idiot. "I just wanted something to read."

Lore studied me, studied my face, and then he released me, stepping back. "Get out," he snarled through clenched teeth.

I turned to leave, but then, as I looked over my shoulder, Lore looked to be warring with himself as his eyes turned red again. When they did, everything changed. Lore stalked toward me with an intensity I had only seen once before. He was a pure animal, led by his primal instincts, a creature peeking out from beneath the surface. He rumbled, only this time it wasn't in a threatening way. He spun me around and dropped me on his bed before he moved above me to stare down at me with those eerily red eyes.

“I told you that you are mine,” that deep, gravelly voice said.

I knew then. This wasn’t Lore; this was his dragon.

“I don’t understand,” I squeaked as I turned to get away, confusion ripping through me for the first time.

Lore reached gently, taking my face in his hand, his thumb caressing my jawline with soft strokes. He placed his hands on my hips as he bent down, breathing me in deeply as his nose lightly traveled up the skin of my neck.

My body responded, the traitorous bitch arched, and a moan slipped from my lips.

Lore smiled. "I've waited for you for a very long time," Lore's dragon said, replacing his nose with his lips. He released my hands, sat up, and stared at me.

"How are you appearing in Lore? I thought you were separated and were…" I trailed off, unsure of the correct term. "Not piloting the ship together?" I asked with a lilting inflection in my voice.

"Things are different now," his deep voice answered as he studied me. His voice went heated as he took in my form, still only clothed in a thin robe.

"What is different?" I demanded as his hands trailed up the side of my body.

"You." He dipped down and rubbed his face on my lower stomach.

Gods, I didn't know a simple act such as that could be so erotic. My head fell back, and I felt my legs part a little. The robe had hiked up, revealing my upper thighs. I was now kicking myself for wearing little more than a thin chemise and robe when searching the library because

now, with him above me and his body on me, I felt everything. I wanted more.

"May I touch you?" he asked, uncertainty in his tone.

I nodded because, apparently, I was an idiot. I couldn't allow myself to feel for him. I couldn't let my heart or body fall for something doomed from the beginning. Lore—or rather Lore's dragon—parted the robe, untying the sash and revealing the thin chemise that now showed my marbled nipples poking through the thin material at my arousal. Lore looked his fill, then as he moved down my body, he lifted the chemise higher above my legs and my core, my most intimate spot.

Before he did anything, he lifted his eyes to mine, the red shining within them telling me the man was not in control, but the monster was. Oh, my goddess, did I want him. Maybe I was perverse to desire a dragon, but he was a far cry better than Lore had been to me.

I felt the need, the want, the desire to feel passion for once to the very core of my soul. With his face so close to my intimate parts, his warm, rough hands on my skin. I wanted to feel him there, damned be the consequences.

I nodded. "Fuck it," I said, realizing belatedly it had been out loud.

I put my lips to his, taking the pleasure he offered while still seeing the red eyes of the dragon as he met my kiss. It wasn't a sweet kiss, but one meant to conquer and claim. To war with each other until one of us conceded to the other. Only we didn't. Instead, our passion soared higher, and I was soon moaning, rubbing against his hard length like a cat in heat.

The dampness between my legs grew until it was unbearable. I longed to feel him, to touch him. It was all wrong.

"Wait. Lore, does he know what is going on? That you are using his body?" I asked, terrified of the answer. Horrified at the fact his consent could be taken from him.

"He is here, he knows, he is…" the dragon trailed off, kissing the side of one of my thighs as he caressed me. He moved teasingly across to the other thigh until I was panting. "He wants this, too, even if he is being a stubborn… How did you put it? Ass."

His lips left a trail all the way to my breasts as he licked and treated me until my head began to spin. His lips took the pink nub of my nipple into his mouth and suckled until I was a panting, begging mess and up again.

My back arched again as I threw my head back, his lips cascading over my collarbone to my jaw, teasing me before he claimed my lips again. Hot wetness pooled between my thighs, and a burning need hit me as I trembled.

As suddenly as it happened, Lore tore himself away from me, his gaze no longer crimson as he stared at me. "I'm sorry. I didn't…" He looked around before he narrowed his eyes. "You tried to get out of stealing my book by kissing me?"

"No, you kissed me!" I scooted further from him, my fists balling up at my sides as the desire to knock him out crossed over me. Instead, I gave him a taste of his own medicine. "Stay away from me, you fucking beast!"

I stormed out, angry and confused once again.

***

Lore and I trained keeping ourselves busy as we were reserved, cold, and distant to one another as we pretended the kiss had never happened. It was much like when we initially avoided each other, except this was different.

There was a charge between us that seemed to pull us to one another despite everything we did to fight it, like magnetism, where the magnets were doing everything to resist the inevitable pull of their attracting ends.

We trained in the yard with weapons and basic combative moves and found ways to be busy away from each other. Until dawn set one night, and a pained roar shook the castle walls. I ran to investigate, only to find Lore shifting into his dragon form… only his shift had stopped halfway through. He was half man and half beast.

I'd seen the magic of the shifters many times, and it was fast and seamless. When the magic took them, it was almost in the blink of an eye. This was painful to look at. I could only imagine what he was feeling.

It was slower as he shifted into his form as if the human side knew that the transition to a dragon would soon be permanent, and it was fighting it however it could. Lore's time was coming soon. The dragon's face contorted in deep pain as it finally finished its transition, bones snapping and popping slowly as flesh gave way to scales.

"Lore, are you okay?" I asked, approaching him slowly. A garbled grunt escaped him, and all fears dissipated as I rushed forward. "What is wrong? How can I help?"

I remembered what Nan would do when I was hurt or scared. She would sing me a lullaby or tell a story as she stroked my hair.

Lore's gaze, still blue in the fading light, locked onto mine. He shook his head as if to tell me there was nothing I could do, but the pain was etched in every plane of his features. I reached out, stroking the visible scales, and began to sing.

A song told of the dragon prince that loved his kingdom. With each note, I moved closer, stroking his scales and the areas where skin remained. He seemed to relax, and slowly, he began to change as the dragon took shape. He pushed me away as the shift finally finished, but I kept singing. As crimson eyes turned toward mine, I saw gratitude in their depths before the dragon took off into the night sky, leaving me to stare after him.

CHAPTER 16

Bella

I found Lore asleep in the library the next day, in the same seat I liked to use. I leaned over as I stole a glance at his resting features. He appeared softer, less lethal in the early morning light, and that damn auburn lock of hair fell into his eyes once more as I gave into the desire to brush it away.

His hand grasped my arm before I could pull away, and his gaze flitted open to reveal crimson eyes. With a deep voice that resonated with his dragon's power, he claimed, "Mine."

Before I could even respond, he swiftly flipped me onto my back, positioning me on the chair beneath him. His intense gaze locked onto mine as he lowered his head, resting it gently on the flat expanse of my belly. Inhaling deeply, he seemed to imprint my scent into his memory, marking me as his own.

“You smell exactly as I imagined you would,” he murmured from above my thighs.

“How do I smell?” I asked through quickened breaths.

His nearness to my center was doing wild things to me. I was again in another nightshirt, having run down here in the morning light to check on him like a fool. For a moment, I thought perhaps this was another dream. I'd had a few lately that left me sweaty, needy, and unsatisfied as I longed for something only he could give me.

"I want to know if you taste like you smell," he murmured before trailing soft kisses down my body.

I didn't stop him as I moaned and arched into him. I was tired of fighting this attraction that pulled me to him. His hands lifted the fabric of my gown, finding me bare underneath, and a growl escaped his lips. I gasped when his tongue touched my center and pressed myself closer into him, begging him to feast on me, to take me. I was wanton in my desire and no longer cared to fight him.

"Like sweet nectar." He murmured against my thighs.

Goddess, did he feast like a man starved, rolling his tongue between my thighs until I was thrashing and bucking. Pleasure built inside me, taking me higher and higher until it crested, and I fell over a cliff of intense feeling that rocked my body. My cries became louder and as animalistic as the noises of approval Lore's dragon made against my center.

My body began to loosen as I melted into the chair. As Lore lifted his gaze to mine, red eyes no longer stared back at me. Instead, the cerulean blue of a winter's cloudless day stared into my soul. As I drifted back down, panting and spent, Lore, not the dragon, stared back at me, his gaze awash in wonder and horror. At that moment, I knew things between us had irrevocably changed. For better or worse, our fates were now entwined.

Lore ran his hands down his face and quickly moved back.

"I…" he began, opening and closing his mouth as if at a loss for words. "I'm sorry. That has never happened before. He hasn't appeared in my body in…" He stopped, shutting his mouth quickly. As if a dawning understanding washed over him, his body went rigid, his face closed off as he took one look at me, turned, and stormed off again, running away.

I tore after him, closing my robe angrily as I went.

"Don't you dare run away!" I bellowed at his back, anger hitting me like a searing pan. "We need to talk."

"Forgive me," he gasped. "I cannot...we should not…"

He turned from me then, muscles rigid with restraint. Disappointment pierced me, quickly followed by doubt. Did he not want me after all? Or did he fear where this dangerous pull between us led?

I watched the rigid set of his shoulders as he retreated, mourning the loss of what we had almost shared. Yet a tiny, traitorous part of me thrilled at having glimpsed desire in those crimson eyes. However, Lore fought it. That hunger yet burned for me. Next time, I vowed I would set it free.

I pursued him as he stalked through the rows of bookcases into the library, stopping briefly to look at my discarded blanket and half-read book. I grabbed his arm, holding him with all my might. As if I let up just a fraction, he would slip between my fingers. That he would leave me.

"Did you want to do that?" I demanded, refusing to let him go. I planted my feet in place.

He turned, his gaze tortured. "Did you?" he demanded as his features fell into horror as if he had done some unspeakable deed with me, the evil vampire.

I stilled, thinking about his question, and realized I had. I had wanted it. I didn't understand why. I planned to kill him, and yet, standing this close to him even now, I wanted him. His rejection was a deep cut, and I glared.

"I did want you, but now I'm having instant regret!" I snapped as I locked my legs in place and lifted my chin, my muscles quivering as I held the emotions in a tightly contained box.

Lore turned, staring at me. Everything changed. The horror and fear evident in his gaze changed, and I realized then that it wasn't disgust I'd seen or even regret. He felt he had done something wrong—to me. It was in the tense set of his shoulders and how his eyebrows drew together in a pained expression. "I am not a good man. You should run from me."

I regarded him for a moment. "No, you're not a good man, but you aren't evil either. I've seen evil. I've stared into it. You are not it."

"You're wrong," he breathed, moving closer to me. "Just because you don't see it doesn't mean it's not there." He stopped, his eyes going hard as he considered me.

I didn't know why I did it, why I pushed the beast and tested the man. Some driving force within me screamed against my common sense; some creature had taken me over, and it purred, my chest rattling as I pressed up against him. That thought entered my mind once again: *MINE*.

It was a declaration, a claim that reminded me so much of what the dragon had said to me. This came from me, deep inside me, as if I, too, had a creature stretching out and unfurling her claws, testing the shell that was me as she scratched along the edges of my mind.

It was then I questioned whether I was indeed descending into madness.

Lore grabbed me roughly, pulling me toward him, his hands going to my face, cupping it, searching my gaze as if searching for answers. I had none.

There was a clash of teeth born of desperation as he pulled me toward him, and our lips molded together. This intense desire was created through a deep-seated loneliness that matched my own. Our souls tuned to each other as they sang together in perfect harmony. Our bodies craved the other's touch. A touch that burned our desires into a raging inferno. I could no longer deny it.

We might have been enemies, we might have hated each other, but there was a passion between us that demanded to be sated. It screamed to feel the bare touch of the other's skin. Refusing to be ignored and not being given what it wanted so badly. He kissed me deeper, our tongues clashing, not in gentleness but in a war that left us breathless and panting. Yet, still, we wanted more. I didn't care if he was my enemy. I didn't care what the future held. Here, in this moment, I just wanted him.

I could want him, I told myself, and we could have today together, leaving tomorrow’s troubles for another day. Because tomorrow, we would be enemies once again.

“We don’t need to be more than just lovers. I want you, and you want me. Let’s just leave it at that.” That little vixen deep inside me seemed to speak without my permission.

“Are you…” Lore broke the kiss as he spoke into my mouth, pulling back slightly. “Are you innocent?” he asked, his eyes filled with concern.

I shook my head. My brief one-time had been nothing like this, though. The passion of this moment was so foreign to me that it felt like I was still a virgin.

“I have once,” I admitted, biting my lip.

It had been a far cry from the experience earlier, and Lore hadn't even entered me. The wolf, that wretched Gideon, had taken my virginity and had turned me around, slamming my face into the bed only to ride me from behind until he had found completion. It left me unsatisfied and no longer a virgin.

I had told myself it was fine. It was okay sex. No, that was a lie. It hurt, and it was horrible.

"Once?" he asked, his gaze flashing, first in anger, then smoothing out to a jealous possessiveness as if he were also going to spout declarations

of ownership.

"It was brief and not really…" I paused, noting his features, that red flashing in and out. "It was not good. It was just okay."

"I have not been with a woman in a very long time, but just okay should not be how it is described. What happens between us will not be just okay." He paused, trailing his hands down my body to cup my breasts and pinch my nipple as I gasped. "Nothing we do will be even close to unsatisfactory," he said with a seductive grin.

He stepped back and tore the robe from my body, then ripped the chemise down the front until I stood naked, the rainbow glass reflecting on my body, the swell of my breasts moving with each ragged breath I took.

"Beautiful," he breathed as his eyes trailed down my body. I felt the cold chill of the morning as my breasts began to pebble, even as my body heated up to a furnace because, in his gaze, I knew he meant it. He liked what he saw. "You are a goddess."

He lifted me into his arms, taking me back to the bedroom we had just left, only this time, it was Lore ready to explore my body, to claim my pleasure as his.

I stood before the bed, trembling as he held me to his body. Giving me time to say no and ask to go. I didn't. I wanted to feel wanted. For just a few fleeting moments, I wanted to know what it felt like to be in another's tender embrace. I wanted to know what it would be like to understand passion—true passion. I wanted him.

Yes, he was supposed to be my enemy, but if I was honest with myself, my body knew every time I looked at him because my heart sped up, and all rational thoughts escaped me. There was a need there that I could no longer deny.

So I sucked in a sharp breath and fell into his embrace. I resolved to take what I wanted, to live in this world with some form of pleasure when I had known so little thus far in my life. The same resolve reflected back to me in his gaze. In this moment, this fragment of time, we could just be together.

I grabbed his neck, pulling his lips down to mine as I claimed him as he had claimed me. Only to break the kiss to pull his nightshirt above his head and help him take off my thin robe. He did this inch by inch with a tenderness that ached inside me, marveling at my body with his lips as he went.

My breath hitched, heat swirling low in my belly. "Lore..." His name escaped my lips in a breathy sigh.

In an instant, he was upon me, a starving man who was presented with a feast. His kiss seared, full of unspoken promise. My knees weakened, and I clung to him, dizzy with yearning.

With deft fingers, he pulled me close, baring my most private areas to his needy caresses. I reciprocated in kind, my hands exploring the taut musculature of his torso, tracing each ridge and valley. Lore groaned against my throat, nipping and sucking the tender flesh there. Expertly, he divested us of all barriers between our fevered skin.

This time, instead of my lover taking me like an animal, he laid me gently on the bed just as he had done earlier, and he kissed me until I was panting and arching into him. Each breath was a begging sound as I wanted more. His hands caressed my body before he settled in between my thighs.

He paused again to ask without words if this was okay, giving me one last option to say no.

I wasn't having it. I burned for Lore to fill, take, and claim me as he said he would. I wrapped my legs around him to keep him from pulling away or running out the door as he had earlier. As I felt him press into my entrance, I sucked in a sharp breath, ready for the pain as he slammed into me. There was only pleasure. He stopped halfway as if checking to make sure I was still okay. Oh, goddess, was I ever.

He stretched me to the limits of what I believed was possible, filling me in a way that surpassed all expectations. With each gradual movement, he expanded my senses, pushing me to the brink of overwhelming pleasure. Intense sensations caused me to writhe and vocalize, a soft whimper escaping my lips as he paused, prolonging the anticipation.

"Are…are you okay?" he asked with such concern on his face that my heart melted a little.

I could not allow that. I could not care about this man even if he was inside of me. As my body moved, I could feel my heart follow suit as he entered me. Goddess, did it feel so right.

"Yes," I moaned, and then, with my legs, I thrust up until he was fully sheathed inside me.

Lore groaned in my ear as he settled himself there, not moving as I adjusted to his size. So I began to move against him, wanting more,

wanting him to take me to new heights, to new ecstasy like nothing I'd ever known. I wanted to feel him inside of my soul.

"Not so fast," he groaned against my ear. "It's been a very long time for me and if you keep doing that, I'll spill my seed inside of you before we've even begun."

"I-—I just need you. I burn—"

Lore cut my words off as he captured my lips in a punishing kiss, his tongue thrusting inside of me. Soon, his hips matched the thrusts of his tongue as I met them both with my own. We began a dance that was as old and magical as time itself as a building pressure started in my center.

One of pleasure.

We moved together in a tangle of limbs and impassioned cries. Lore worshiped every hollow and curve, wringing gasps and moans from my lips as he learned my most intimate secrets. Finally, movements became harder and deeper, and our bodies fused in exquisite harmony. Lore swallowed my keening cry with a searing kiss as he claimed me fully, irrevocably. As the building intensified to a crescendo, I could no longer handle it. It peaked and crested until it exploded—and I with it—into a million tiny fragments.

My pleasure burst through my body as I shook and screamed Lore's name like a promise. I could feel my body convulsing around him as he became almost brutal, and his thrusts became deeper and more demanding. They carved out a place with my center and within my fallible heart as he took me. With a cry of his own and a jerk of his body, he found his release, slamming hard inside of me one last time.

After, we lay replete in each other's arms. The silence between us was weighted with unspoken truths. This was more than lust and convenience —our souls had collided and melded into one.

He lay next to me, his arms around me. He held me as if the day didn't exist and only that moment mattered.

"How do you break the curse?" I asked, breaking the bubble of our cocoon of languid pleasure. I hated doing it, but a new idea wrapped its sticky fingers around my dark thoughts.

What if his mate showed up one day, and I had given him everything I had to offer? What would happen to me then? After what we had just done, I knew that the magic we created together had done something no one had ever done to me before.

In the jagged pieces of my rough, hardened heart was a place for Lore to make its home. Caring for people was a weakness that terrified me, and I feared this would be how I finally found the end of my miserable life. It was a mistake to care about someone. Falling for the enemy was a grave mistake, but planning to kill them was an even bigger one. It was at that moment I knew I was in serious trouble.

"The curse is not your concern," Lore muttered, his voice sharp and cold as he answered me, instantly releasing me and pulling away.

He was cold again, all traces of tenderness gone, and my heart plummeted. I was such a fool.

"It does concern me. I'm stuck here," I said sharply. "At least tell me who this 'true love' of yours is. Do you know her? Have you met her?" The questions spilled out before I could stop them, tinged with bitterness and insecurity I didn't want him to hear.

Lore remained silent for too long as I lifted from the bed and glared at him.

Lore withdrew entirely then, the coldness of his retreat more painful than any blow. "You know we are enemies and nothing more. This changes nothing."

His words pierced my heart, even as anger roared through me. I flung bitter words, channeling my anguish into rage. How dare he use me so callously!

In the end, he retreated to the solitude of the castle. I snatched up my clothing, keeping merely the blanket from his bed wrapped around me as I stormed out of his bed-chamber, weeping tears that seared like dragon fire. What cruelty, to find bliss in his arms only to realize I had been a fool. All the more to harden my heart further and burn that little part he had found his way into, only to cut me deeper than I'd ever been cut before.

I lay awake long after Lore was gone, my mind spinning. Did he see me as a mere distraction, a way to pass the endless days until his supposed true love arrived? The thought pierced my fragile heart like a dagger. After opening myself so completely, the idea of losing him to another threatened to break me. Yet what choice did I have but to accept it?

All the more reason to kill him, I seethed.

CHAPTER 17

Bella

"Careful now!" Alastair yelled at me as I rounded a corner and slammed right into him, too concerned with keeping the bed sheet wrapped around me to pay attention to my path. Alastair stared at me as the corners of his lips twitched upward, but the glare on my face that I pinned to him had him swallowing hard. "Bad night?" he asked as he pressed his lips together. His expressive eyes betrayed him, however, as they danced with mirth.

"Actually," I almost yelled. "It was the best damn night of my life. It was the morning that turned into shit." I wrapped the sheet tighter around me as I stumbled down the corridor toward my room, hearing Alastair chuckle from behind.

"Funny, Lore said much the same," I heard him say behind my back, and I wanted to scream. "Back in my day, we called that corridor the walk of shame." He laughed.

I rounded the corner, slamming the door to my room and dropping the sheet instantly, muttering curses about Lore to no one but myself… or so I thought. As I entered the room, I realized Alysha was holding a tray.

Her eyes widened at my disheveled nude body. I glared at her, refusing to cover up, too angry to care.

"This big as freaking hell castle and all you people can do is be exactly where I don't need you to be!" I yelled at her.

She flinched, and guilt hit me like a ton of bricks.

"I… I'm sorry," I said, my voice softer as I covered my breasts with my arms. I grabbed my discarded clothing—the ones I'd arrived in—and quickly threw them on.

Alysha stood silent until it hung heavy in the air.

"I'm sorry, it's just…" I trailed off, not wanting to share my morning activities with the whole damn castle. Some things, including my shame, were meant to be private. Once dressed, I moved closer to her. "I was unkind. I am truly sorry. My foul mood is not of your making."

Alysha let out a long, heavy breath. "You slept with him?" She stared at me as if she'd never seen me before. Shame hit me again as I felt it course through me, and I stepped back.

"I, uh, I did. It was weird—his eyes were red and then his dragon came to me last night, and I don't know, I just… I just lost all sense of everything."

I'd lost my damn mind, more like it. It had been… it had been glorious. Everything I'd ever wanted for the first time that had never been given to me. I could still feel the pleasant throb between my legs where he had been just a mere hour earlier. The thought sent desire through me once again, and I clamped my lips tight together to keep from moaning. There was something seriously wrong with me.

Alysha studied me with a myriad of emotions flashing across her face as she inspected me. I didn't know her well enough to read her, but it looked like both relief and concern.

"You saw his dragon?" she asked, setting down the breakfast tray and sitting as if her legs gave out on her. "What did he say?"

"He did that whole alpha thing like the wolves do when they want to own a woman. He said I was his. All…" I lowered my voice to mimic Lore's dragon voice, "You're mine."

"He…" She stared at me as if I was the most baffling creature she'd ever seen. "He claimed you?"

I shrugged. "If you want to call it that. Bunch of macho misogynistic crap if you ask me."

Alysha touched her face, and then her hand went to her heart. She then lifted her arm and pinched it. "Oh, dear," she breathed, her gaze seemingly in a daze. "I should go start the roast for tonight," she said offhandedly as she rose. She departed, leaving me in the room with a tray of food. My stomach rumbled loudly, so I sighed, quelling my anger as best I could.

"You need to eat and get your strength up if you're going to get out of here," I muttered to the silence before I devoured the food, thankful for Alysha's thoughtfulness because, apparently good sex left one starved.

Now more than ever, I needed to figure out this curse and make plans to escape. I knew the ending would be Lore at the end of my blade, but now, for the first time, I felt hesitation.

That desire to survive, to fight to the very last moment, and to do anything to achieve just one more day, no matter the cost. It seemed to turn murky because how would that cost tarnish my soul forever?

Would a life in this world be worth the blood on my hands? That piece of my heart, now flickered to life, told me that perhaps I should find another. There was a tiny sliver of hope, and hope was a dangerous thing.

CHAPTER 18

Lore

My dragon had surfaced inside of my mortal body. It spoke through me, moved my body. All to be with this girl. The vampire half-breed, Isabella. Never in all my years cursed had he ever come to me in the day in my mortal form. Not since the curse had been created all those centuries ago. We were cut off from one another.

The cruelty in which the moon goddess twisted her curse. Because being cut off was like missing a part of my soul. For a short, fleeting moment, that part of my soul and a part I never knew was missing, collided, and I felt whole.

I felt content, restored, as if I'd finally found my home, my reason for being. The reason I'd suffered for so long suddenly felt as if it was worth every second, even for just a few moments. This terrified me. Terrified me in a way I couldn't put into words or even work through the conflicting emotions that twisted inside me.

She had done this to me. Bewitched me and used magic to pull my dragon out. The moon goddess must have sent her. I stormed through the castle, cursing and smashing my fist into the wall as I sought out that area of the castle I always craved. I was broken, in pain, and spiraling into darkness.

She'd asked me about the curse, and it was more evident than ever that it was closer to claiming me forever. There was no promised true love. If there was, I prayed she never came because the monster inside of me would be her ruin.

I felt my dragon’s claws unfurl within me as he scratched the edges of my mind as if he were that much closer to fully taking me over.

I made my way to my sister Lara’s room, stopping in front of the stained-glass windows that showed our kingdom’s history and shame. There was no littered furniture, only dust, ghosts, and heartache. I studied each pane, seeing the red dragon over the castle, its red scales glowing from the outside light.

A stillness came over me as my thoughts drifted back to Bella, to the passion we had found in each other’s arms that morning. It had been so long since I had been with another woman, but even in my memories, nothing had ever felt like that.

It had felt right, like I had found a piece of myself that had always been missing. This thought made me go to the door before my sister Lara’s room and see that the dust had been disturbed. My steps faltered as I looked around. Someone had been here recently, and the footprints were dainty and petite, just like a beautiful, infuriating half-vampire—the uninvited guest of my castle.

I moved to stare at the portrait of Lara. Layers of dust obscured her smiling face. She had been so vibrant, so full of hopes and dreams. Until the vampire queen stole all the light and joy from Lara’s spirit in one cruel act of betrayal.

I remembered her excitement at being invited to the court for the first time when we worked hard to unite the two kingdoms. Something Lara had indeed been the instrument of change for. Upon the first time home, she had blushed with moon eyes as if she had found a man with whom she'd fallen in love.

I’d wanted her to be happy, and there had been no reason to remind her she'd never be allowed to have more than a crush on someone in another court. So I’d dumbly let her hold onto the hope in her heart that love was possible.

The next time we had visited, when we came home, things had been different. She had been different. It was obvious her heart had been broken.

Soon, we’d found her dead, taken by her own hand. I had found evidence of the vampire queen Isabella's treachery. She'd taken my beautiful, young, naive sister and had used her, then she’d broke her heart as she used her to fuel the very war Lara had desperately tried to keep

from ever happening. The shame and heartbreak had made Lara fall into despair, which had taken her from this world forever.

I’d blamed the entire vampire kingdom, and I had given them their war. I had become their nightmare.

I walked over to the balcony doors and out to look across the land, which was so different from what it used to be. When Lara had still been alive, there had been laughter and love here. My parents and I had lost a part of our souls when she’d left this world. Our love for her had made us lash out, and we’d still suffered the consequences.

When the war had come, I had done unspeakable things. I’d lost my way in my anger, desire for retribution, and vengeance. I’d led our troops to war, and we’d killed without abandon. My men had followed orders without question. The generals had seen any one of the moon clans as a threat, young, old, innocent. It hadn't mattered. We had eradicated any and all in our path. I had been a monster and a monster I would remain.

When Lara had died, a hole had been torn into my heart, leaving a gaping abyss that I thought would never heal. It would only continue to shrivel and die in the hurt that remained where she had once been. Losing my little sister had broken me, leaving an endless void in my heart. "Lara," I whispered into the dark corners of the dusty room.

Yet, what we had done and had become was the opposite of what Lara had believed. Lara had wanted to bring peace to the clans, tear down the lines, and make us all one people. I’d believed her secret love for the vampire queen had made her see the world this way.

With a sigh, I closed the balcony doors and jumped to the ground below, waiting for dusk to turn on this cursed land. With one last sad look up to her room, I said goodbye. "You were right. You were always right, little sister."

For centuries, I'd been severed from my dragon, our bond shattered by the moon goddess's bitter curse. Once, we had been two parts of one whole. Now, a jagged chasm divided us. I had been condemned to walk this earth alone, my soul torn asunder.

In my darkest moments, I called out with my mind, striving to bridge the gap between us. Only silence responded, hollow and endless. The dragon's absence haunted me, an aching void I could not fill.

At times, I feared my humanity was slowly slipping away, the man I once had been fading into shadow. Rage came quicker, and coldness

seeped into my heart. The dragon had tempered these impulses, balancing the extremes of my nature. Without our connection, I was adrift.

Now, this girl—this Bella—had changed everything. For the first time in centuries, I felt the dragon stir, drawn by her presence. The possibility of reforging our bond teased me, offering salvation.

Perhaps the curse could be broken through her, and I could be made whole once more. Or she might be the key to my utter ruin, my final fall into darkness. I knew not which path awaited.

I had to find her. This half-vampire temptress called to both man and dragon. She might be my only chance to salvage what remained of my humanity before it was consumed forever. I clung to this fragile hope, pushing back against the shadows. I had to believe she would lead me back into the light for both our sakes.

Even if it turned out she was the key to breaking this curse, then I would have to sacrifice more than I was willing to give. In the end, my humanity would be lost in the same way.

Yet every time I thought back to her, what it felt like to be with her, to feel her, and to touch her, it was both a comfort and a deep-seated fear that gripped my insides. I felt things I'd never felt before when I was around her. Perhaps even emotions that I never could feel until now.

But I could never tell her that.

In her presence, it felt as if I stood too close to the sun, like my dragon's fire brushed over my skin like a warm kiss, touching but never burning. A bittersweet feeling in the back of my mouth made me yearn for more than I deserved. I was in so much trouble.

As my thoughts wandered to every moment in her presence, the way I felt pulled toward her as if stuck in her gravitational pull, I knew one day I'd fly too close and burn from her intensity. My dragon had claimed her and knew.

I knew what that meant.

She had finally come.

CHAPTER 19

Bella

I found Lore in the armory, sharpening a blade with smooth, practiced strokes. As I entered, the metal rasp on stone grated in my ears, bracing for the coming battle. He glanced up, pale eyes frosty.

"We need to talk." I crossed my arms, feet planted. I was angry that he gave me a morning of pleasure and then left me cold, furious, and used.

Lore's lip curled derisively. "I have nothing to say to you."

I wanted to slam my fist in his pretty face. He was a tittering seesaw of hot and cold. One moment, he was friendly; the next, he was angry and cruel. It was making me dizzy.

"Well, I have plenty to say to you," I shot back. "Like why you refuse to tell me about this curse."

He slammed the sword down. "It's not your concern," he repeated like one of those stupid birds from a traveling performer, repeating the same damn nonsense.

My blood boiled in my veins. "The hell it isn't!" I advanced on him. "I didn't ask to get dragged here by your dragon. I'm stuck in this gods' forsaken castle because of you and your curse. I deserve answers." I stilled and realized my mistake.

Lore's gaze turned molten with anger. "You think I want my dragon to do whatever he wants at night without my knowledge? Do you think I want to be cut off from him all this time?" He growled as he stalked forward, his hands clenching into tight fists.

"What do you mean you're cut off from your dragon?" I demanded, planting my feet as I tilted my head to glare at him. I refused to back down or let him scare me.

"It means..." Lore began, moving swiftly until he was towering over me. Pain and threat rolled off him in waves as he glared down at me, his expression too confusing. "It means you need to be careful around me," he growled, his eyes flashing red.

So much anger and so swiftly. It made me think - and not for the first time - that Lore was affected by not having a complete connection to his shifter side, his dragon.

Like a piece of him had been missing for far too long, it had slowly driven him to these intense mood swings and moments where he was grumpy and wretched. I couldn't let him get away with it. He needed to know it was not okay to talk to me this way or try to intimidate me. I was tired of men in my life thinking they could just push me into a corner and take what they wanted.

I was tired of them thinking because I was a little weak girl, it was okay to use intimidation against me. My anger flared white hot as I stepped forward, ready to take him on if needed. I bared my teeth, uncowed. "Yet you seemed happy enough to fuck me this morning. What changed?"

His nostrils flared, but his eyes remained pale blue with no hint of bleeding red. The dragon did not appear—only the man. Honestly, it was the man who scared me and the dragon who excited me. I swallowed hard but refused to retreat.

"Tell me about the curse," I demanded.

Lore grabbed me, slamming me against the wall. His muscled frame caged me as I struggled. He leaned in, breath hot on my throat, and said, "The curse cannot be broken. I am damned, as are you."

I froze, shock coursing through me. Was our fate sealed just like that? Lore abruptly released me, sorrow flickering across his face before the mask slammed into place again. Dazed, I slid to the floor, grappling with this cruel revelation. We were prisoners here, and our destinies interlocked whether we willed it or not. The cursed dragon and vampire's granddaughter, enemies and lovers, what future could we possibly have?

"There is an ancient curse upon this kingdom," Lore said, his eyes haunted. He rubbed the back of his neck and took a long, deep breath, the

skin creating tiny creases at the corners of his eyes before going smooth again. "Many centuries ago, after I inadvertently caused the death of the moon goddess's daughter, she struck back with her twisted magic. She froze our entire kingdom in time, condemning all who lived here to endless stagnation, never aging or changing. We are powerless prisoners."

My ancestor had been the instrument in his sister's demise, and I felt his pain as acutely as if I were the one to place the curse on him. The way he felt trapped, helpless for so long. I could understand that. I'd thought about it for every day of my life. Though my pain could not even scratch the surface of his.

I sat on the cold floor for a long moment before finally sighing, muttering a soft apology as I turned and left.

Because now fear wriggled inside me. Lore was going to destroy me. I feared if I let myself care about him, there would be nothing of my heart left. Even though we had this magnificent moment and a connection like nothing I'd ever felt or that his dragon had claimed me, it meant nothing.

We were enemies. We always would be. So, I walked outside and focused on finding a way out of this wretched place.

I walked the entire wall, all the way around the perimeter. The same poisonous thorns surrounded the entirety of the castle grounds. Only this time, as I studied them, throughout the thorns were the biggest and most beautiful roses I'd ever seen. I wondered if they were also poisonous. I had started to reach for one only to snatch my hand back, the reddened scar on my hand still throbbing.

"There has to be a fix for this," I muttered. I hadn't eaten anything today, too preoccupied by my conflicted thoughts.

"You see them, don't you?" Billy asked, making me jump.

I hadn't heard him approach; I was so intent on my thoughts. I turned to look into his young yet wise gaze, thinking not for the first time how frustrated he must be to be stuck at this age, frozen in time as a child.

I nodded. The thorns were as impenetrable as Lore's heart.

"What's it like, Billy?" I asked him softly.

He nodded, knowing what I meant. "At first, it was fun." He paused, taking a seat as our legs dangled over the stone wall that faced the castle. The poisonous thorns weren't far from our backs. "You know, you don't realize the difference until it's all you realize." He sighed.

"I thought being hungry, cold, and unloved was the worst fate imaginable, but I think the idea of being stuck here for centuries while the world outside moves on is probably much worse."

"Now add in being stuck as a ten-year-old," he muttered bitterly, the first hint of his displeasure at his predicament showing. "I put on a brave face and smile for my mom, but I hate it so much. I just want to grow up, but I can't."

I placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "I hope you get to grow up soon." I paused, watching the sun slowly dip lower into the horizon as it set in the distance. "I'm not sure I'm going to be any help if I can't find us a way out of here first."

"There is only one way out," Billy said. His eyes were distant momentarily before he turned and began to climb down. Once on the ground, he said, "Tonight's a full moon, so you'll need to come inside. I think Mama has something special planned for dinner."

"What does a full moon matter?" I called after his retreating form, but he didn't answer me.

"You need to go get dressed!" Alysha practically yelled at me as I stood before her in a dirty tunic and ripped leggings, covered in dust and dirt from my activities of the day.

"Why?" I looked down at myself, dusting the dirt from my legs. "I look fine."

Alysha snorted. "You look like a stable boy, but we can fix that." She grabbed my arms and pulled me to my room, talking about the one night a year when things were different. I pretended to understand, smiling and nodding like a loon while letting her drag me across the castle. I carefully

scooted around the odd furniture and knickknacks in various areas and places. Usually, I just pushed them out of the way.

I'd even stumbled over what appeared to be a tea tray the other day, denting the delicate, dainty metal as it skittered to the ground.

The way Alysha passed them, reverently touching each object and bit of furniture as if saying hi to an old friend, struck me as odd. I had noticed Lore giving a wide berth to the furniture as well. Had they gone just a little mad in the centuries of being stuck here? Was this my future if I didn't get out? The questions echoed in my mind, twisting my stomach and making my heart beat to a point that almost hurt. My breaths became shorter as I felt, not for the first time, like a bird stuck in a cage with a predator. One that wanted to eat me bit by bit.

Soon, Alysha and I stood before my rumpled bed, where a beautiful dark purple dress had been laid out. The bodice was corseted, and the dress fanned out like a bell. The sheer material over the top was inlaid with dark purple stitched droplets that looked like falling leaves were cascading down from the waist. Roses and rose petals in a dark shade of blue-toned crimson melted into the dress's purple shade as if the rose petals were flying away and down the bodice. It was more beautiful than anything I'd ever seen.

"Why do you want me to wear this?" I asked, perplexed as I touched the soft fabric.

"It's a special night," Alysha said as she pushed me toward the bathing area where hot water already steamed from the tub.

Minutes later, I was standing in a towel scrubbed until I sparkled, and now, I smelled like roses from the oil she'd poured into my bath.

"What is up with the rose scent and…" I motioned back toward the dress.

"Lore's mother used to love roses. He'd bring her back a new rose bush every year for her to plant. She began planting them around the castle so that people would see them when they entered the castle grounds." Alysha shrugged as she pulled a comb through my wet strands.

She twisted and braided my moonlight strands until they were half off my shoulders, leaving a layer of hair still cascading down my back. She forced me into the gown.

"Is this really necessary?" I muttered as she sprayed more rose-scented perfume into my face until I sneezed.

"It's a special night," Alysha echoed before she inspected me, walking around me and making appreciative noises as if she had accomplished her goals.

Before I knew it, she pulled me back through the corridors and shoved me into a room lit low and laid out with food—a table set for two.

I turned to leave, to run out of the room, but just as I turned, I slammed into the hard chest of a body. As my eyes traveled up, I met the gaze of Lore—red eyes meeting mine. No, not just Lore, but his dragon too.

I turned my eyes to the window where the sun had long since left the sky, then looked back at him. My eyes widened in shock. It was night, and the man stood before me—albeit with the eyes of his dragon, but the body of the man all the same.

"I-I should go," I stuttered before trying to run, but a large hand gently grabbed my arm, making me still.

"Please don't," a rough, gravelly voice said. Lore's voice, the dragon's voice. I turned to meet those red eyes.

"He wouldn't want me here, or to have dinner with me," I said softly, remembering the words we had shouted to each other earlier.

"He is…" the dragon trailed off as if considering the right word. "We are just stupid," he said with a triumphant grin as if admitting it was something he should be proud of.

I felt my lips twitch in response. I liked his dragon far more than I did him.

"Please stay." He wrapped his hands in mine, pulling me back toward him. Once I stood close to him, he took one hand to tilt my face up to his. "Let me make…" He paused again, trying to remember the correct words as if he hadn't spoken in so long that it was hard to search his vocabulary. "Up for that with tonight."

My breath caught in my throat as I stared up at him, my thoughts going to the morning. Lore and I had lost ourselves in each other's arms and the way he felt as he moved inside of me. How, for the first time ever, pleasure meant something to me. Not just a means to distract myself only to find myself utterly disappointed in the end.

There had been no disappointment in Lore's arms. In this dragon's arms, I felt the heat of his body near me as my heart sped up and that wetness between my thighs began to form again. I had to fight to keep myself from pressing my knees together.

The dragon leaned in and breathed in my scent deeply as he growled. That sound, purely primal and a different predatory need, made me arch my back. A soft whimper escaped from my lips. "I think…" I said breathlessly. "I think I can stay for a little bit."

The dragon smiled at me with carnal delight as if he had already imagined what I would taste like if he feasted on me instead of the food left for us not far away.

"Good."

We sat and began to eat, the dragon clumsy at first as if he'd forgotten so much of what it was like to be in a mortal body.

"I thought you two were separate due to the curse," I said as the dragon that sat before me in Lore's body looked up from shoving a mouthful of meat into his mouth. Without really chewing, he swallowed it whole before answering me.

"Things are changing," he said darkly.

"You have." I pointed to his mouth, where a bit of the meat sauce was smeared in an impressive arc around his mouth.

The dragon wiped his mouth with his sleeve, then winked at me. "I'm afraid it's been a long time since I've done this." He set his fork down, wiped his hands off, and walked toward me. "Would you like to dance?" he asked, and there was a vulnerability in his face and in the way he worded each syllable.

I couldn't say no. I put my hand in his and let him sweep me away. My heart secretly soared as I thought of all the times in my childhood I'd wished to be whisked away by a handsome lord at a ball.

Music began in the distance, and we moved into the ballroom he'd found me in before. I noticed the furniture had been carefully pushed aside, leaving the entire floor open to use. As we danced, it almost felt as if I closed my eyes, I could imagine the ballroom was full of people there to watch the dragon prince and me dance.

Each time he pulled me close, I forgot a little more that we were enemies or that the man beneath the dragon hated me for things I had no control over. I could forget that I was a captive in a cursed castle.

Soon, all I could think about was that I was having more fun than I'd ever had in my life. We laughed and locked gazes as heat traveled between us until the music stopped, and the dragon inside of Lore pulled me close and captured my lips. He kissed me as if he were starving, as if one kiss

from me would save him from death. He kissed me as if his very existence depended on it. He kissed me with such passion that I melted into him and lost all sense of who I was.

I felt him backing me up, taking me in his arms again. My legs wrapped around his waist, and I found myself once again up against a wall. His lips claimed me again until he stole the very breath in my lungs. Until part of him seemed to burrow deep inside of me, similar to how he had the other day. This time, I felt a spark I couldn't explain that seemed to pulse, grow, and spread within me. I had to deny one that shouldn't exist, one that should be between enemies.

I pulled my lips away to do just that, but the vulnerability in Lore's dragon's eyes and desperation stilled my lips. "Look at me and see all the darkest parts of me. See the darkness in my soul and do not turn away in fear. Learn to love all those parts of me. The jagged edges of my soul fit with the edges of yours like a puzzle. I know what you are. Who you are to me. I have waited so long for you." He said the words with such fevered ferocity and tenderness as he traced the corners of my jawline and then his thumb across my bottom lip. He claimed my lips again and pulled away one last time as if he hated the thought of us separating. He tilted his forehead to mine and lowered his voice. "I will burn the world for you. I will do anything for you. You are mine now and forever. Let me be yours."

I opened my mouth to speak, to deny him. This was too much, too soon. I was not meant to be his anything. Before I could say anything, crashing glass stopped my words. Lore and his dragon turned, leaving me cold and longing for his heat.

What I saw when he turned dropped me nearly to the floor. The dead. The dead were crawling through the window. Their sightless eyes were white, and their skin, what they had left of it, was gray and unsightly. Some had missing limbs or parts of their body muscles barely covered as the evidence of decay and vermin had eaten parts of their body. They moved with an unnatural speed that, in life, they could never have maintained.

Lore turned to me as he drew a sword, panic in his red gaze. "Run!"

My feet carried me several yards down the shadowy corridor before I skidded to a halt. What was I doing, running like a coward while Lore battled the dead alone? If he was my destiny, as the dragon had claimed, then I needed to stand with him.

I stopped, realizing I couldn't just run away and leave Lore in there to fight by himself. What if they got Alysha or hurt Billy? This wasn't just about me. I needed to fight, too. I couldn't cower and pretend it wasn't happening.

I spun on my heel, sprinting back the way I'd come. The sounds of the ongoing struggle grew louder as I approached—the zombie's ghastly moans, the dragon's enraged roars, the crash of toppling furniture. My heart hammered against my ribs, but I refused to give into fear.

I looked out the window to see the last rays of light descending into the distance as more crashing glass and the sounds of the dead invading the castle increased. The roar of a dragon as he transitioned into his form rocked the foundations of the castle itself.

Bursting back into the ballroom, I assessed the chaos instantly. The floor was strewn with broken zombie bodies, but more kept crawling through the shattered windows. In the center of the room, the dragon lashed his spiked tail, sending the undead flying. They just kept coming.

I scanned the ground, grabbing a heavy silver candlestick. Testing its weight, I nodded firmly and threw myself into the fray. I smashed the candlestick into the nearest zombie's skull, carving into the decaying bone. It collapsed in a heap, but two more lurched toward me, hands outstretched hungrily.

The battle raged on as I crushed and battered the relentless horde. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the dragon's fiery breath incinerate a cluster of zombies to ash. We were holding our own—we might survive this night after all.

I didn't notice the zombie looming at my back in my distraction until its fetid claws sank into my shoulders. I screamed as its jaws snapped for my throat, the candlestick clattering to the floor. With a roar of fury, the dragon barreled into my attacker, sending it flying off me in pieces.

The damage was done. Blood poured from the gashes in my shoulder, the stench attracting the other zombies. I tried to scramble away, but my torn muscles gave out. The dragon shielded me with his body, flames keeping the horde at bay. We were surrounded, our strength rapidly fading.

We fought until we could no longer stand, the dragon biting heads off and burning half of the horde as we finally made it outdoors and under the moonlight. We found Alastair, and he joined us as we spent the hours in battle holding them off. I prayed Billy and Alysha were safe. Soon,

tiredness made my legs stumble and my arms too sore to hold the sword in my good hand, as blood loss began to truly become a problem for me, even though Alastair had made a makeshift bandage at one point in the night.

It felt like an endless battle, an endless night of carnage.

As the night wore on, it seemed our fate was sealed. A piercing ray of dawn split the darkness, bathing us in glorious sunshine. The remaining zombies shuddered and collapsed, ashes in the wind. We had survived to see the light of a new day.

The castle was in shambles, and so much of the room, the furniture that Alysha and Lore had treated with such reverence, was in pieces. Lore fell to his knees as he looked out across the wreckage.

I moved slowly toward him, placing my hand softly on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I offered, my voice weak and tired from the long night. I grunted as my shoulder shifted, and an intense pain shot through it.

Lore turned his haunted gaze to me, his eyes taking in my injury. "I told you to run, to hide. If you…" He shook his head and pressed his lips together. He checked my bandage, and his lips pressed firmly together. He shuddered, looking away, and when his eyes turned back to mine, they were hard once again. "Go. Get out. Leave me. Alysha will come tend your wound."

I snatched my hand back. His words were not unusual. He occasionally turned to cruelty, but how he looked at me now made it seem as if all of this, the destruction and even the curse, were my fault.

"Leaving me in the dark, not telling me anything!" I yelled as my anger cut me like a seared knife. I let all that rage out on him. "Refusing to give me the truth, it has not served you. Now tell me what I'm stuck in. What is this fucked up fairytale nightmare I've been forced to be a part of?"

The only answer was the dark chuckle from Lore as he shook his head.

Anger formed within me as I saw his sword not far away. I snatched it up and held it up to his throat. I'd planned all along to kill him, to take his life, and this was my chance.

"Tell me," I snarled, my hand steady as I held the sword. The blade cut a shallow line on his throat, a trail of blood running down Lore's neck as he lifted his chin, almost as if he were begging me to do it. Our eyes collided, and I realized that was precisely what he wanted. He was begging

me to kill him, to end the ceaseless torment of his cursed existence. The resolve in his face told me he would welcome death.

His eyes flashed crimson as if hearing my thoughts, and the dragon stared out at me with resignation. "Do it," the dragon rumbled, "for there is no life without you." He closed his eyes, sighing as he released all tension from his body, finally at peace with his fate.

I dropped the sword as if scalded, staring down at my hands in horror. I had planned to kill him, I realized with a jolt. I was no better than the monsters I despised, willing to kill for my own ends.

When my eyes met Lore's again, rage roared through me like an inferno. He looked upon me with bitter disappointment as if I had somehow become less in his eyes by sparing him. That look shattered the last fragile thread of sanity I clung to.

With a feral scream, I snatched up the sword and swung it wildly, chopping it into the nearest antique chair. I hacked viciously at the old furnishings, consumed by a crazed fury. With each splintering blow, I gave voice to a lifetime of pain and helplessness.

I heard the roar of Lore in my ears. Strong hands wrenched the sword away, forcing me to face blazing blue eyes alight with horror.

"You have no idea what you've done," Lore choked out. He opened his mouth as if to explain, then snapped it shut, slowly shaking his head. When he finally spoke, his voice was hollow. "You cannot see as I do. Now, you will."

Lore spoke strange, archaic words that raised the hairs on my nape. His hands waving over me, pressure built in my skull, and I squeezed my eyes shut against it. When I forced them open again, I wished I hadn't.

Blood was everywhere. It drenched me, the coppery tang cloying in my nose and mouth. Bodies lay strewn around the once-grand ballroom, flesh rent and spilling crimson. Frozen faces were twisted in agony, eternally trapped in their final moments. With dawning revulsion, I realized these were the cursed people of the castle, suspended helplessly in time. And I had butchered one of them.

There were so many pieces of flesh and bone, and it was hard to tell which had been from me. Where the sword had cleaved pieces of wood laid what appeared to be an elderly man dressed in fine clothing now stained in blood. His face didn't appear to be wrenched in pain or agony, but as if it were frozen in time, still in his last moment. A pleasant smile

stretched across his lips because he was unaware of the death that had been dealt him. Death by my hand.

I fell to my knees and retched, sobbing. When I could take no more, I fled blindly down the halls, unable to face the gruesome horrors I had unwittingly unleashed. What had I done?

CHAPTER 20

Bella

Weeks passed, and I stayed away from Lore. The veil he had lifted from my eyes showed me the truth of what had been hidden in magic. Yet, the next day, I saw only furniture again, but the images didn't leave me when I closed my eyes. I saw them as I walked the castle grounds, searching once again for a way out. I realized now that no matter how much I said I was going to kill Lore, I couldn't.

If it hadn't been for Alysha, Billy, and Alastair, I'd have gone mad as the time passed with little changes from day to day. Billy would join me on my walks in the morning as I tested different areas of the wall. I finally got into the guard tower, where I found myself face to face with a huge and sharp thorn. The doors remained glued together. Nothing happened when I used a weapon, such as an ax. No chips in the wood, not a change.

Apparently, the only destruction was caused by the enchanted objects within the castle.

"You're holding the ax wrong. Not that it will change anything on the door," Alastair's deep voice noted from behind me. "I have a better idea for you and that ax."

I stopped my swing to stare at him. "What?" I asked, hoping he had a better way to break down the door. "Alastair, I need to understand what happened."

"We need wood." He shrugged, ignoring my last words. His eyes crinkled up at the sides as he smiled warmly.

"Why did zombies attack?" I asked again. "Why are there people stuck as furniture?" I asked, planting my feet in the dirt. "I need answers."

"I assume Nyx is getting restless that the curse hasn't consumed Lore yet." Alastair swung the axe from hand to hand as if this was a typical day, answering with a simple solution. "It's been a while, but sometimes she likes to send zombies during Lore's one night off as a dragon to remind him of who cursed him." He paused, testing the weight of the axe as his eyes met mine, and a somberness darkened them, "She doesn't, for one second, want him not to know even an ounce of suffering. Maybe she senses there is a change." He shrugged. "Would you mind helping me out? I seem to have misplaced my other ax."

I knew from the look on his face of a stern, unyielding wall he would say no more.

I wanted to snort and say that was highly unlikely, but I felt the need for company if I was honest with myself. I had long since tired of staring into the empty spaces, waiting for Lore to appear, yet not having the guts to go to the library to find him.

The shame and guilt of chopping a person to pieces in front of him still haunted my every waking and sleeping moment. The screams of the dead pulled me from my sleep in a cold sweat some nights. The other nights, I was haunted by my father's sharp hand and harsh words.

Soon, we stood near a stump where several logs lay ready to be split as wood. I debated how the wood could be here when all the trees were so far away past the wall, but I remembered what Alysha said—every day, the day started over. The land was replenished and replaced with what was needed.

I followed Alastair and picked up the axes. He placed the wood down, ready to be split.

I lost myself in the motion and the task as my mind calmed. Soon, the motion of the ax began to echo in my mind. With every hit, I saw the horrific scene again—only this time, I was hacking away at the person—the man who had seen his end.

Anger surged through me, and I hit the wood harder and faster as flashes of the scene ripped through my mind. My breaths became heavier, and my heart was pounding so hard I was sure it would pound right out of my chest.

They had kept this from me, kept me in the dark, and, as a result, I now had blood on my hands.

With a scream, I dropped the ax as it connected with the wood and fell to my knees, sobbing into my hands.

Alastair stood silently watching for a long moment before he sighed and stepped forward, dropping a comforting hand onto my shoulder. "I know you must blame us, and you have a right to. This place, the curse… there are things we are bound to that we cannot do or say."

"I need to know more about the curse." I sniffled and then wiped my eyes as I took deep gulping breaths to slow my pounding heart and the way it ached at the pain I'd unknowingly caused. It was another reason I knew I was never meant to be a vampire. The idea of taking a life and living off the pain of another sickened me. I'd live and die as a mortal with the sun on my face daily. Now I had blood on my hands. Innocent blood.

The irony was the fact I thought I could kill Lore. How I'd planned it when I was looking for a reason to vilify him and justify a reason to. Yet, I couldn't. I felt the sobs threaten to erupt once again, and I swallowed them down, rose, and dusted off my legs.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

I found Lore in the armory, sharpening a sword. After weeks of avoiding him, he was purposeful in his movements. When my foot hit the room's stone, his ears seemed to almost perk up, and his head tilted ever so slightly my way. Even from a distance, I could have sworn I'd seen his nostrils flare.

I stood in the doorway, unsure if I should turn around and leave him be or do as I had planned to and demand answers that weren't in the journal. Scouring the castle had left me with questions that remained unanswered, and I was tired of being left in the dark. It seemed odd that whenever I turned around, it was here in the armory that I found him as if lost in thought or returning to a familiar place.

"Where were you when the curse took effect? There was obviously a ball going on. Were you not dancing with the others?" I demanded as I stepped forward, tilting my head up. I could feel my hands bunching into the tunic at my side, but I forced them to flex as I waited.

"I was here," he said gruffly, as if he hadn't spoken in the weeks that I'd avoided him, as if he too was punishing himself.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I pleaded, my fingers squeezing tightly into fists as I felt my nails digging into my palms.

Lore opened his mouth as if to speak, his gaze colliding with mine. So much was spoken in one look. So much anguish, so much pain. "The less you know, the safer you are."

"They know." I thrust my arm out toward the doorway. "Why not me?" My body rigidified as I prepared to bury my heels into the stone beneath my feet. I would have my answers.

Suddenly, Lore stood and advanced on me as I stepped back. Another fresh anger ripped through me, and he caged me with his anger. Only the rage began to simmer as I looked into his gaze, the blue flashing between crimson. "You were never meant to come. Never meant to be real." He searched my face as if sketching it to memory. A tender hand reached out and brushed a wayward white strand from my face. "Your hair is like moonlight," he breathed before pain flashed across his features, gone within a second, making me think that perhaps I had imagined it.

"Tell me," I pleaded, my voice soft and vulnerable.

"To break the curse, I would have to make a sacrifice I'm not willing to make. Not now, not ever." He stared into my eyes with an intensity I didn't understand. His gaze turned crimson, and my dragon stared back at me. "We've waited for you for a very long time."

A terrible understanding washed over me. The prophecy I'd read—Lore must sacrifice his true love to break the curse. He refused to pay such a price, even for his kingdom. Confusion seemed my constant companion because he would never find this love. I surely wasn't it, no matter what his dragon believed. I couldn't be.

I shook my head, confused. "You—you hate me. Lore hates me."

He moved closer, his eyes intense and laser-focused as he leaned toward me. His hands went out to caress my face as I felt my traitorous body arching into his touch, turning my face into it. When I realized what I was doing, I snapped my head back, which was a mistake as it brought

our lips only a breath apart. He trailed his lips lightly over mine, soft and gentle, before he pulled back.

"He doesn't hate you; he fears you. Dragons… we know what is ours in an instant, but men, mortals, are harder. Lore's still catching up." His deep voice rumbled before his crimson eyes faded back to blue.

"Do you know when he will take over? Are you both connected together again?" I asked.

"No, we are still disconnected but in all the years in the castle he's never been able to show himself in my mortal body until you came." Lore leaned forward to breathe me in, making me arch my back. He pushed off the wall and stepped back.

I realized he had taken my anger from me, distracting me. I refused to be distracted. I planted my hands on my hips and glared, forcing my thundering heart to calm down and thoughts to quickly scream at me to kiss him.

"So you know that your dragon claimed me, right?"

"I suspected as much." Lore nodded, ran his hands through his dark auburn hair, and a deep sigh escaped him.

"What was that with the undead the other night?" I demanded. Again, I grabbed hold of my anger, refusing to leave this alone and just trust him. "Why do they attack, and why are all those people suspended there? Are you the only one that can see them that way?"

Horror hit me as I remembered the broken porcelain pieces on the throne before entering the ballroom. He had stared at that throne with anguish so great I had felt it coming off him in waves. Was he forced to look upon his parents every day, stuck in between the state of life and death?

"Goddess," I breathed as the realization hit me. "This curse; it's to torture you. It's all meant for you to suffer."

His anguished-filled eyes met mine again. "You will suffer too if you don't find a way to leave."

I straightened my spine. "The attacks?" I demanded in a firm voice, refusing to fall into fear and anxiety. "Why?"

"There haven't been any attacks like that in centuries. I suspect the curse is close to an end." I watched as Lore sat, but his words were sad and despondent, as if the end wasn't good. It was as if he feared it as much as he desperately wanted it.

"Will they attack again?"

He nodded. "Most likely."

"Train me as you promised and tell me as much as you can about the curse as you can." I walked toward the swords, hesitating momentarily in the flash of memory of the last time I'd held a sword.

"I am sorry for that…" He trailed off, watching me. Seeing far too much. "I shouldn't have shown you."

"They say ignorance is bliss, and I'm one to agree, but if you hadn't, I wouldn't understand the gravity of the curse. That your entire kingdom is frozen in time, hidden from all the world but you."

I paused as I forced my hand to clasp around the sword and pulled it free. A thick silence seemed to stretch out between us as I studied the sword, forcing myself to accept the memory of the blood and gore and what I'd done and to let it go.

All I could do now was try to make up for it and make amends for my ignorance. "I refuse to live in the dark."

CHAPTER 21

Bella

Months passed, and we fell into a steady rhythm, with Lore training me with a sword and basic self-defense. Alysha kept me company as I helped her with the nightly dinner, and Billy walked the wall with me daily as if some new hole would appear.

Each day, I noticed things were changing, as if the curse was growing in response to these changes. The thorns around the castle looked like they were dying on the outside edges. I wanted to think that was a good sign, but I suspected it was the opposite. I felt it on the wind, a staleness that stank of death. Something was coming.

Soon, I realized I'd lost track of time, unsure what the date was outside this frozen world. Time began to make little sense.

One day, as Billy and I sat on the wall again and stared at the castle, our feet dangling over the edge, an odd feeling skated across my neck. It was a feeling that something terrible was going to happen. A knowing that went deep into my bones. I looked over at Billy, who had a goofy smile stretched across his face. He'd just finished telling me that yet another animal had found its way inside the castle when something happened that made him blush, and his eyes widened. His voice broke.

I snapped my gaze to him. "Has that ever happened before?" I asked, curious. I wondered why I felt like things here were changing but that the change wasn't necessarily a good thing.

Billy looked mortified and shook his head. "Never."

I stared at him for a long moment, studying his face, and that's when I noticed he had a new freckle.

I threw my half-eaten apple over the wall into the thorns and then climbed off the wall. I brushed my legs off. "I have an idea. Billy, will you come with me?"

We went back to the kitchen, where Alastair and Alysha were peeling potatoes for dinner. "Are you hungry already?" she asked as we filtered through the door.

I shook my head. I remembered my Nan had a wall she marked each time I grew. I wondered if Alysha had one for Billy.

"Alysha, did you ever mark Billy's height as he grew as a child? Maybe somewhere in the castle?" I asked.

Alysha stared at me and blinked, then her gaze shifted to Billy as if she was seeing him for the first time in a long time. "Billy, my love, come here." She stood up, abandoning her potatoes and wiping her hands on her apron. She took her son's face in her gentle hands as she studied him. Her eyebrows drew closer together to form a line between them.

"You do seem a wee bit different, don't you?" She pushed his hair away from his face and then stepped back. "Stand tall. You are almost about… to my shoulder." Billy stood tall, his back erect, and a gasp fell from Alysha's lips.

"You've grown a full inch!" Her eyes snapped to mine, the joy on her face evident, but something didn't sit right with me. If Billy was growing and changing, why weren't the other people freed, and why was the curse still in place? What was changing? I had a feeling it wasn't something good.

I left them to find joy in that moment, refusing to be the one to ruin it. My mind kept returning to the dying thorns, the fact that Lore's dragon could enter his day body. Lately, at night, I'd heard him in the skies patrolling as he did every night. Maybe tonight, I needed to talk to the dragon, not the man.

As night fell, I slipped outside, my nerves thrumming with anticipation. The dragon had been distant lately, patrolling the skies but never engaging. I needed to know what was happening to him.

It wasn't until later in the night that I finally found him.

The moon hung low and hazy, a ring of crimson encircling it like a warning. Unease twisted my gut, but I pressed on through the gloomy

castle grounds. I found the castle wall and looked out toward freedom for only a moment. The thorns loomed, jagged and foreboding. Many vines lay withered, trailing limply along the ground. Disease festered in this place, the curse rotting from the outside in.

From my vantage point, I searched for the dragon that had claimed me because I felt something that made me know he was hurting. There was a twisting feeling in my gut as a prickling sensation on the back of my neck every time I thought of him, just as I had the same sensation as I watched him now.

There was something wrong. It felt like I was stuck in a fog and couldn't find my way out. My dragon needed help. I could feel it as if it was instinct.

I found the dragon perched on a crumbling parapet, his massive claws gouging furrows in the ancient stone. Luminescent eyes gleamed in the darkness, feral and devoid of reason. No spark of recognition lit their crimson depths when they fixed upon me.

"It's me," I pleaded, even as icy fingers of dread clutched my heart. The beast blinked, reptilian membranes sliding sideways over empty scarlet orbs.

A guttural snarl vibrated from his throat as smoke curled from flared nostrils. I backed away slowly, pulse thundering in my ears.

"Please, you have to remember..." My voice cracked with sorrow and fear. If the curse had consumed his consciousness, what chance did any of us have? We were damned, our fates sealed by bitter vengeance centuries before I was born.

With a bone-chilling shriek, the dragon unfurled its leathery wings and launched itself at me, all vestige of humanity erased. I flung myself aside just as deadly talons rent the earth where I had stood. The force of its passing knocked me sprawling, and my injured shoulder wrenched painfully.

"Fuck," I groaned, convinced that arm was damned to the seven levels of hell.

I scrambled to my feet, sprinting in blind panic as the enraged beast wheeled back around. Its fiery breath scorched the ground, the inferno licking at my heels. At the last second, I dove behind a crumbling wall, cowering as flames engulfed the structure above me.

When I finally risked peering out, the night sky was empty. The dragon had vanished as quickly as it had turned on me. With staggering steps, I limped back inside, despair threatening to swallow me whole.

As I collapsed into bed, the significance of the reddened moon mocked me. The curse was building toward its brutal end. And this time, I feared none of us would survive the coming storm.

CHAPTER 22

Bella

There was something in the air. Not the stillness of earlier or the changes that seemed to be burning into the stagnation of this cursed land and people… No, this was different. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake the feeling.

"You are not keeping your stance properly," Lore grunted at me as I faced him, sword in hand.

"My stance is good enough to knock you on your ass," I muttered low, but I knew he heard me anyway as a smirk stretched across his face.

"You need to take this seriously."

"Okay, I'm going to *seriously* knock you on your ass." I advanced on him, swinging my sword high—too high. I realized too late I made a liar out of myself and knocked myself on my own ass.

I huffed, blowing my loose strands of hair out of my face, and lay in the dirt for a few moments longer than necessary. Today, I'd decided to broach the subject of the changes with Lore. Things had been odd between us.

There was definite tension, and a few times, we'd come so close to kissing, but each time, he pulled back as if he was doing everything to put me at arm's length. It was driving me crazy.

His hands were on me again, and my mind was going in every direction but what I was supposed to do. I admitted that my heart seemed to speed up, and my stomach fluttered when he was near. Perhaps it wasn't just mind-blowing passion between us. I enjoyed his hands on me, even in

these simple moments. I felt my hand touching his lightly as my breath hitched.

Lore stared at me, lifting an eyebrow as if warning me to focus. But as much as he tried to hide it, I saw how much I affected him, too. His eyes dilated and flashed crimson and back as heat warmed the liquid sky blue in his gaze. His lips parted as if he was remembering the feel of his lips.

He stepped back and, with a groan, ran his hands through his dark auburn hair. "You will be the death of me, woman."

I wasn't going to deny I wanted him. That when I wasn't around him, I thought about him. That at night, when I could hear his dragon in the sky, I wished it was him and his dragon touching me and moving inside of me.

Only I'd not seen his dragon flashing in his eyes since that one day and just now. Now, it seemed like the changes were taking his dragon and him further away from me.

I had stayed away from him, but it had been hard. The longer I stayed away and deciphered the emotions that were plaguing me, I realized that my feelings for him were more than just lust.

The sun beat down on us as we circled each other, swords raised. Lore's eyes were steeled, his jaw set in determination as he prepared for my next attack. I knew I should focus, but my thoughts drifted to the strange tension brewing between us.

His hot and cold attitude was maddening. One moment, we were locked in passionate embraces, and the next, he pushed me away. Since he realized that his dragon was drawn to me, he had withdrawn, fighting the inexplicable pull between us. I longed to break through the walls he had erected, to confront him about the unspoken emotions simmering beneath the surface. The proud jut of his chin warned me he would rebuff any vulnerability.

With a cry of frustration, I charged, swinging my sword with wild abandon. Lore deflected it easily, quirking one arrogant brow.

"You'll have to do better than that," he taunted.

His flippant tone ignited my temper. I struck repeatedly, venting my conflicted feelings with each furious blow. Lore matched me strike for strike, his eyes alight with exhilaration. Our deadly dance stretched as sweat slicked our skin under the relentless sun. Still, neither could gain an advantage over the other. As we slammed together, breastplate to breastplate, the air between us crackled with sparks.

Lore's eyes smoldered, his lips parted as he panted raggedly. This close, his earthy scent enveloped me, conjuring memories of our passionate encounter weeks before. Unbidden, my gaze dropped to his mouth, and a devastating yearning unfurled within me.

With a growl, Lore wrenched me against him, his sword clattering to the stones. One hand grasped my neck, and the other snaked around my waist.

"Why must you tempt me so?" he rasped, his eyes tormented.

My heart thundered. "I could ask the same of you," I whispered. "One moment you pull me close, the next you shut me out."

Lore's jaw clenched, conflict raging in his stormy eyes. With a curse, he crushed his mouth to mine. The kiss seared through me like wild and consuming dragon fire. I melted into him, returning his fevered passion measure for measure.

When we finally broke apart, gasping, the yearning inside me had transformed into a bittersweet ache. No matter how Lore tried to resist, we were inexorably bound, two halves of one fractured soul.

The curse still loomed, an uncrossable chasm between us. Lore's stubborn pride refused to acknowledge what was written on both our hearts.

I gazed at him, praying he would finally relent and trust in this… whatever blossomed between us. His expression shuttered, leaving me alone in the cold. Without a word, he turned his back and retreated into the castle, taking my hopes with him.

I sank to my knees, cursing the cruel fate that destined us to be eternally torn. No matter how desperately I yearned for his acceptance, Lore remained determined to keep me at bay. When would he realize that only together could we prevail against the darkness? For now, he chose to barricade himself behind empty denials… leaving my soul to wither in despair.

The stillness of the castle grated on me as I restlessly paced its empty halls. Ever since Lore rejected me again, bitterness festered in my heart. I needed to act, not wallow in despair.

I made my way to the dusty library. Surely, among the leather-bound tomes and faded scrolls, some clue to lifting this accursed curse waited to be discovered. I had combed through everything and found nothing new.

I lit a single candle and began my search, methodically combing each shelf. Most texts were nonsensical ramblings or ancient histories. Tucked away behind a sheaf of crumbling papers, I uncovered a small journal bound in cracked leather.

Trembling, I opened it to the first page. Uneven scrawl filled the yellowed parchment:

Prophecy of the Moon Seer, Era of the Dragon Kings.

My pulse quickened. This must be a record from Lore's time before the curse fell. I read on with bated breath:

When crimson blood stains the silver moon, the end shall come. Only the sacrifice of the cursed true love will end the stagnation of the land...

The rest was obscured by age. I swore violently, nearly hurling the fragile book across the room. Even this scrap of prophecy spoke, hinting at a grisly sacrifice.

Had the moon goddess foreseen Lore and I, star-crossed lovers doomed to tragedy? Was our tale destined to end in blood?

"What have you found there?"

I whirled, the journal tumbling from my fingers. Lore prowled closer, sunlight streaming through the high windows to halo his brooding form. His eyes narrowed, fixating on the open page at my feet.

"Nothing of consequence," I lied hastily, scooping up the book. Too late—Lore gripped my wrist, emerald eyes blazing.

"Do not attempt to deceive me. I can scent your excitement." His tone held both menace and desperate longing. "What revelations lurk inside that book?"

I hesitated but knew I owed him the truth, however dark. "It speaks of a sacrifice… of cursed and the cursed beloved. How to break the curse." My voice dropped to a pained whisper. "I think it means us."

I steeled my heart, hoping he wouldn't say his true love was still out there, and all my fears returned. I sucked in a sharp breath and prepared to be crushed. Lore only watched me instead.

Lore stood rigid, his gaze fixed on the book in my hand but said nothing.

Somewhere in the tangled threads of our fate, hope lingered. We would find it together… or burn trying.

Lore released me as though scalded, anguish etched on his proud face. "You should not have come here," he rasped. "Now we are both damned."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "How am I damned?"

Lore stared at me for a long moment, his features reflecting a whirlwind of emotions. "We both are."

I pressed my lips together before lifting an eyebrow. "A little more clarity would be nice," I muttered.

"In order for the curse to be lifted, a sacrifice has to be made," he said.

"What kind of sacrifice?" I demanded, crossing my arms as I lifted my chin, trying to act as if his severe, deadly tone didn't frighten me a little.

"The kind that ends in death."

I flinched as understanding crashed over me. The prophecy from the book—spoke of our fate.

Lore watched me with infinite sorrow in his eyes. "I thought by keeping my distance, I could spare you. It is too late. You are cursed as I am now."

"Tell me," I begged and demanded, feeling his weight as he stood beside me. Instinctively, I moved closer, seeking him out.

"It was after I led an attack on a village of witches," Lore said painfully, not meeting my eyes. "The moon goddess had a daughter there, a half-mortal child. My men showed no mercy, slaughtering all in their path for retaliation against the vampires. The goddess arrived to find her daughter dead. In her grief and rage, she damned us all for the innocent life I had taken."

Lore's shoulders slumped under the weight of guilt and regret. "Her curse turned my family and kingdom into lifeless statues, frozen in time. Each night my dragon form is freed, but without memory or reason. Only a sacrifice of love will break it."

My mind reeled with this devastating revelation. We were star-crossed lovers, destined to die together to free Lore's kingdom from eternal suffering. Fate had bound us in tragedy.

"There must be another way," I whispered. I knew this, but I'd had some desire to find a solution, a misguided hope, even as reality's despair

threatened to drown me. Lore just shook his head, the bleakness in his eyes mirroring my heart's darkness.

He turned away, his broad shoulders slumped in defeat. The yawning chasm between us had never seemed so vast, yet I could not surrender to despair.

I had run toward this castle to save myself, and this dragon had answered my plea. He had been there for me every time I had needed him, the one to heal my broken soul, and now he was slipping away into the darkness forever.

Months ago, I decided to break the curse by killing Lore. Now, I knew I could never go through with it. I doubted I ever really could. I feared all was lost as that feeling that something wicked, something terrible that settled under my skin and clung to my bones, was coming—and soon.

I found myself lost in thought as Lore had long since left me to ruminate in my morose thoughts. I heard the roar close by as I walked through the halls past the ballroom and armory, not daring to look at the furniture—no, the enchanted people—that littered the floor.

The acrid smell of smoke roused me from restless dreams. I stumbled to the window, gazing at the hulking shadow perched atop a crumbling tower, eyes glowing crimson in the gloom.

My dragon.

My Lore lingered somewhere within that monstrous form, locked in the curse's cruel prison. I had to try to reach him before he completely lost himself to the ancient magic corrupting his soul.

Shivering in my thin nightdress, I crept outside into the chill night air. The dragon's slitted eyes tracked my approach, a menacing rumble vibrating in his massive chest. Tendrils of inky smoke unfurled from flared nostrils.

"Lore..." I called softly, hands raised in supplication. "It's me."

The dragon hissed, its serpentine tail lashing against a weathered stone. I stood firm, my heart hammering against my ribs. When his head reared back, his maw gaping to release a jet of blistering flame, I fell to my knees.

"Please!" I begged, tears streaking my soot-stained cheeks. "Remember who you are!"

He froze, the fire dying in his gullet as I gazed upward in wordless entreaty. Scaled lips retracted from dagger-like teeth as the creature slowly

bent his terrible visage closer. One gleaming obsidian claw-tipped my chin up, razor-sharp edge against my vulnerable throat.

Without flinching, I met the slitted crimson eyes, imagining I could see echoes of Lore's human spirit behind their feral ferocity.

"You are more than this curse," I whispered through bloodless lips. "Our fate is not written in the stars. Only you can reclaim yourself from the darkness."

A shudder rippled along sinuous coils, and vast pinions rustled. Confusion clouded those draconic orbs for one breathless moment, and my heart swelled with fragile hope.

The shutters closed, the beast retreating back to inhuman instincts. It reared up with an ear-splitting shriek that reverberated to my bones.

As it took flight, the wind from its wings nearly dashed me against the stones. Still, I clung to faith that I had reached Lore, but only briefly. We would find a way back to each other. We had to believe it or surrender to despair.

Somewhere within the dragon's fiery heart, our love lingered. Next time, I would pierce his armor of anger and pride. Lore and my dragon were in there, and I would set them both free.

CHAPTER 23

Bella

"You know what you should do," Alysha mumbled as she poured another glass of wine.

"What is that?" I asked slowly, watching to see if she spilled the wine. It sloshed precariously, cresting the sides of the glass. Alysha smiled a slight grin and sipped her glass. At the same time, she one-handedly corked the bottle and settled it onto the small table between us. I looked at the furniture entirely differently now. Anything could be more than a bed or a table.

The first night after I'd found out about the furniture, I slept on the floor until the next day when Alysha woke me with her cackle. Telling me not to worry and that I wasn't sleeping on top of anyone. I was still not convinced.

"Just go sneak in his room, undress, and hide under the covers. When he lies down, pounce on him."

"Pounce on him?" I asked slowly, shaking my head. "You want me to surprise him naked."

"And bounce on him," Alysha said while making a vulgar expression with her hands smacking together.

My face, already red from the wine consumption, was now six shades redder. "I thought you said pounce."

"Pounce, bounce it's all the same." She giggled and, with a sharp inhale, drained the recently filled wine glass.

I was also feeling the effects as I swayed slightly. I had minimal experience with alcoholic drinks and even less so with the kind that tasted good. I was only one glass in and already feeling braver than usual. It wouldn't last long; my vampire blood would burn through it.

"You're right. I should confront him." I stood, and Alysha didn't move from her spot; instead, she seemed more inclined to nod off to sleep in the chair.

The sun was still high, so a brave thought entered my mind. I knew Lore liked to take a nap right before departing for the night in his dragon form. As I watched Alysha nod off to sleep, I slipped silently out of the room with a mission in mind.

After leaving Alysha, the wine buzzing through my veins fueled my determination as I went to Lore’s bedchamber. My hands trembled, though I could not say whether from nerves or intoxication. Still, liquid courage galvanized my resolve. Tonight, we would confront the truth looming between us.

I slipped inside unnoticed, then waited in the shadows as Lore entered. He moved about the room, shedding his tunic and boots until only thin linen pants remained. I drank in the sight of him, resplendent even in the dim candlelight.

As he sat heavily upon the bed, weariness bowed his proud shoulders. Now was the moment. I emerged silently from the darkness, and Lore’s gaze collided with mine, raw yearning shining in his eyes. For an endless moment, we simply stared, the air molten between us.

I went to him, tilting his chin up as I stood before him. “No more hiding, Lore. Tonight, we end this.”

He grasped my waist almost desperately, pulling me closer still. “There are some truths that should remain buried,” he rasped, even as his hands roamed my body wantonly.

I captured them, stilling their fevered motions. “I know your dragon claimed me as yours. I must hear the words from your lips, Lore. What lies between us now?” Though my body trembled with vulnerability, I held his tortured gaze unflinchingly.

Lore surged to his feet, pacing in agitation as one hand raked through his hair. When he finally turned back, raw emotion burned in his eyes. “You madden me, temptress. I try to resist, but it’s useless.” His hands

curled into fists at his sides. “I want you, I need you, though it dooms us both.”

His confession shattered my defenses. I flew into his arms, claiming his mouth hungrily. Lore returned my passion twofold, his kisses scorching trails of fire across my heated skin. We tumbled onto the silken sheets, lost in sweet delirium.

That night, our bodies wrote poetry too profound for mere words. We moved together in sublime harmony, every caress and kiss a whispered avowal. The release found me keening his name, ecstasy coursing through my veins.

Yet, I wanted more. Even with the sun sinking in the horizon, his eyes again shone crimson, showing he was about to transform soon. I took control as I straddled him, taking his length deep inside me as I positioned myself.

His hands grabbed my hips as a groan escaped his lips. I leaned down to capture it with my lips, my moans filling the late hour as I looked into those crimson eyes. Both my dragon and Lore. I moved my hips in an instinctual rhythm.

I rocked and felt him stretching me out, filling me in impossible ways. Lore’s dragon made a guttural sound as he leaned up to take my nipple in his mouth. Biting it to bring me a mix of pain and pleasure that made me rock my hips faster and needier as I chased that building pleasure that started at my center.

His half-lidded eyes locked with mine, dark with desire. As my orgasm began to build further, threatening to shatter any moment, I closed my eyes only for Lore to grab my hair.

“Look at me, princess,” he demanded, his eyes blue again. I locked eyes with his and saw the same conflicted feeling, need, and want that I felt, pushing me over the edge. I cried out as my orgasm rocked my body on top of him. My center clamping down around him with each spasm clenching around him. Soon, I heard his grunt as he found his release. He spasmed with me, inside me, spilling himself deep into my core.

Afterward, I lay replete against Lore’s chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart. At this moment, the curse and prophecies faded away. We were just a man and a woman, souls recognizing their mirror image.

Yet, as I drifted toward sleep, an insidious doubt crept in. Despite baring our hearts tonight, Lore still withheld his deepest truths from me.

Shadows would remain between us until he entirely relinquished his demons. I could only trust that Lore would lay himself completely bare before me someday. With that silent prayer upon my lips, I slipped into dreaming, barely aware, as he slipped from the bed and into the night.

CHAPTER 24

Lore

As Bella slept peacefully beside me, I was consumed by grief and indecision. I had intended to use her to break this curse once I realized she was my fated mate. Only now, I wanted nothing more than to lie back down with her and spend an eternity between her pretty thighs.

Pushing her away had not spared me the agony I knew was coming. To free my kingdom and people, I must sacrifice the one joy fate had granted me in endless centuries of pain. The moon goddess was merciless in her vengeance.

My dragon raged within, desperate to take Bella far away and keep her forever. Though our minds were sundered, I sensed fragments of his emotions. He cared deeply for her. Yet lately, I felt a growing disconnect, lost in an impenetrable fog that filled me with foreboding.

The goddess had never decreed an end to her bitter curse. I had assumed it was everlasting until the wheel of fate brought me face-to-face with my fated mate. What vicious irony that it should come to this, only to lose all at the bitter end.

The decaying thorns, my dragon's distress, and Bella's whispered fears all heralded the approaching climax. Time grew short, yet I wavered. Could I sacrifice the one ray of light that had pierced my endless darkness to save those already condemned? Was the greater good worth such a devastating price?

I gazed upon Bella's sleeping form, my fractured heart splintering anew. My dragon's frantic denial screamed within me. "I will burn the world for her."

Perhaps we both would if that was what it took to defy the curse. Either way, I feared the coming dawn would see one or both of us consumed by fire. It would not be her who paid the price of my sins.

Bella stirred fitfully, her lips forming my name in slumber. Gently, I brushed a strand of moon-pale hair from her lovely face, awed that one so pure and good despite her heritage and upbringing could be fated as the mate to a monster like me. She deserved a man unstained by centuries of violence and fury, not a dragon cursed to shadow.

Yet our souls were inextricably entwined, our fates woven past all unraveling. I had thought of remaining detached, denying love to spare us both. It was far too late for that. Against all reason, this stubborn woman had claimed my heart utterly.

So I would gladly embrace the fire and ash to save her, even if it meant defying the bitter prophecy written in her blood. Some prices were too steep, even for freedom from endless torment. If my defiance only damned us further, then so be it. We would face the end hand in hand, the cursed beast and his beauty. No power on this earth would take her from me.

With a tortured sigh, I turned away from Bella, clinging to this last shred of peace that remained in her sleeping, beautiful face. Tomorrow, blood and flame awaited us both. Tonight, my dragon called to me, and I could not force the pull of the change to stop. I would revel in the memory of her embrace one final time. Let the dawn scatter our ashes.

No, I would save her. I would find a way, no matter what.

I moved out into the nearly night sky and met it with anticipation, the feeling of the shift taking me on. Just as I felt the transformation, my dragon whispered to me before it was devoured in a hazy mist.

I will burn the world for her.

And then there was nothing.

CHAPTER 25

Bella

I awoke warm and pressed against a rigid body in the early morning hours. The small window in the room filtered in the early morning rays, and the male behind me must have just snuck back into the room because I knew he couldn't stay the night with me.

His dragon needed to be released at night. A fear hit me, and with the dragon's memory loss, it seemed that one night, he would fly away and be unable to find his way back. I quickly brushed it aside, knowing the curse would not allow that.

I nestled closer to Lore's warmth, wishing time would freeze us in this perfect cocoon. Reality waited just beyond our doorway, ominous as the blood-red full moon that would crest tonight.

A sacrifice was coming. The prophecy foretold it, though its exact meaning remained shrouded in secrets. Lives lost centuries ago cried out for justice. The decaying curse sank claws deeper into Lore's soul with each passing day.

Tonight, the crimson moon would rise. With it came a reckoning written in the stars before my birth. I could only grasp tendrils of hazy intuition, unable to pierce the veil of hidden truth. Unease slithered up my spine as I gazed at Lore's beloved face. Sometimes, I caught him watching me with infinite sorrow as if memorizing each detail before losing me forever. It stirred nameless fears in my heart.

I shook off the ominous thoughts as Lore's eyes fluttered open, crystal blue in the muted dawn. He offered a drowsy smile that made my pulse

quicken. "Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough," I lied.

Lore saw through it, frowning.

I forced brightness into my tone. "Just bad dreams. I'm sure it's nothing."

Lore pulled me close, voice muffled against my hair. "Whatever comes, we will face it together."

I fell into silence, wishing I could just spend the day in his arms, but something was pushing on the back of my mind, a feeling of infinite doom coming. It was as if the end were nearer than we realized. What end, I wasn't sure.

Lore softly kissed my bare shoulder, nestling closer to me. "Let's pretend it isn't daytime yet, that the sun hasn't risen, and that I do not turn into a dragon that can't remember his name. Let's lose ourselves in each other's arms one more time."

I rolled over, a grin stretching my face, all thoughts of doom gone as I pulled him to me and lost myself in the feel of his arms and the sweetness of his kisses.

“Did you enjoy bouncing?” Alysha cackled as I walked into the kitchen with my hair still mussed. My stomach protested louder than my lack of propriety. She was busy kneading some bread flour all over her body and a little on her nose. Her deep blue eyes, far darker than Lore’s, sparkled in the dark as she pressed her lips together as if barely containing another laugh.

I grinned back at her. “I did, actually.” Though I felt the blush spreading across my cheeks and knew I was as red as the tomatoes settled next to her cutting board awaiting their fate.

“Well, at least some good has come out of all this thickness in the air,” Alysha mumbled as she kneaded the bread and placed it in a bowl with a cloth to watch it rise and bake later.

“You feel it too?” I asked as I sat across from her, taking a bowl of her special porridge as I began eating it.

Billy walked in and sat beside me, taking his bowl, only to groan a second later. "Ugh, this stuff again?" He tilted his head back in exasperation, sighed deeply, and shoveled the porridge into his mouth.

"It's good for you. It'll stick to your bones," Billy's mother chided.

"I could eat the entire pantry and nothing would stick to my bones," he muttered around a mouthful of food, much to his mother's dismay. She narrowed her eyes at him. After a moment, as they stared each other down, Alysha merely sighed, shook her head, and made another batch of dough.

"Where are Alastair and Lore off to?" I asked but already knew the answer. They were most likely training at this time of day, honing skills they had once needed in battle. Or at least Lore had. Alastair, from what I could gather, had been a hunter.

I finished my meal, and Alysha gave me a sly wink as I headed out the door. Billy's grumbles filled the space as I left. I was sure some of the grumbles were meant for me since I missed our morning perimeter check.

I moved toward the training ground, already hearing what I knew I would: the sound of clanking steel against steel. As I turned the corner of the castle, I saw them there. Both had their shirts off and were sweating heavily. It was Lore where my eyes traveled to, and I couldn't look away. I thought about what we shared late in the day yesterday and this morning, and I felt my face heat as it spread through my body. I no longer sought a way to escape or kill him.

If I had to spend centuries stuck with him in a curse, I would endure it for him. I knew we didn't have the luxury of that. Something was changing, and it wasn't for the good. I watched from a distance for a bit, watching as his muscles rippled and caught the sun, how his body moved with fluid, graceful steps. How he was a weapon himself. The way he moved so naturally. I envied that ability.

It was Alastair who gave my presence away. "Look who's come to gawk at us," he teased, a sparkle of humor glimmering in his eyes. "Do you think she likes my muscles?" His lips stretched in a big grin as Lore slammed his sword into his with more force, causing Alastair to fall backward. Lore stood over him, sword poised at his neck.

"Yield," Lore growled with deadly intent as if their fight had been real.

Alastair's eyes flared momentarily as he stared up at him, quickly throwing up his hands. "I yield."

I marched over, grabbing a sword from those propped and ready for use. The months of training with them both had made me an adequate fighter. I was not even close to being as good as them, but I was better than I had been when I’d started.

Lore turned toward me, preparing to begin training with me, but I shook my head, pointing at Alastair. "I'll fight him."

Alastair smirked. "Told you it was my muscles she was staring at."

I rolled my eyes at him and got into position to fight. The clang of steel on steel echoed through the yard as we practiced until sweat dripped off our brows and down my back. Lore was quiet and seemed lost, deep in thought, and plagued by worries.

I wanted to ask him what was wrong, to reach out and take some of the burden from his shoulders. I knew it would be like all the other times. He would push me away, and I'd have to chase him down again. Instead, after my arms grew weary, I excused myself from training, ready to do some light reading and hoping I found some answers this time.

So I escaped into the library I now felt I could claim as my own.

The stillness of the castle grated on me as I restlessly paced its empty halls. After a month of being here, I'd searched every inch of this place. There was nothing here. Yet, as I lit the candle and began my search, my mind kept returning to the chilling prophecy I had uncovered months before.

"When crimson blood stains the silver moon, the end shall come. Only the sacrifice of the cursed fated love will renew..."

I shuddered, the cryptic words echoing through me. Lore was convinced the curse was unbreakable, our fate doomed. If that was the sacrifice required—the life of his true love in exchange for the kingdom's freedom. We were doomed before we had even started because if one thing was sure, a half-vampire like me was not his fated love.

What if it was wrong? I refused to accept just one fate, one finality, when there could be a better ending.

I sank down amid the shelves, wrestling with the terrible proposition. Could I willingly lay down my life, even for Lore? Unbidden images of our passion flashed through my mind. I recalled the silken warmth of his skin pressed to mine, the exhilaration of our bodies joined in sweet harmony.

Yes, I realized with dawning certainty. I could sacrifice everything for one more stolen moment in Lore's arms. Without him, life held no meaning. That realization made me drop the book in my hands, and horror washed over me. Somewhere along the way, I'd begun to love Lore.

The creak of a floorboard startled me from my brooding. I hastily composed myself before facing Lore, hiding the turbulence within. His eyes pierced mine, azure orbs reflecting the same hidden burden.

At once, I knew with resounding clarity that our fate had been sealed long before this night. I would gladly embrace the fire and ash to save him, even if it meant defying the bitter prophecy written in my blood. Lore was my destiny, and I was his.

Though I had vowed once to take Lore's life, now the thought of losing him ripped my heart to shreds. How had this callous dragon shifter breached my defenses? I knew, with resounding clarity, that I would give my life if it spared him endless torment. When had his fate become so entwined with my happiness? Our story could only end in tragedy, yet how could I turn my back on my sworn enemy when he desperately needed me?

I would find a way back to him, I silently swore. Let the moon goddess rage—she could not keep us apart.

The die had been cast. When the time came, I would offer my life to free Lore's kingdom. For him, any price was worth paying. Tonight, I would reclaim my fate.

The air was thick with tension as Lore and I checked our weapons for the third time. We both felt it—the sky darkened as something wicked approached, and tonight's blood-red moon rose.

Lore had gathered swords, axes, and bows in grim preparation. His mouth was set in a tight line, his eyes steeled for the coming battle. He refused to tell me why he was sure an attack would come that night. I could see the concern etched in the corded muscles of his back as he stared out the narrow window.

Something had shifted these last months, and an unspoken understanding was passing between us. Enmity had turned to friendship and something more. An undercurrent of heat was now charging our every interaction. My feelings ran more profound than mere attraction. Lore

remained stoic, keeping himself barricaded away despite the pull between us.

Even with the tension in the air, his nearness pulled my thoughts back to the moment we were in each other's arms. How it felt to be one with him and lose myself in his touch, and the feel of him as he moved within me.

It felt right, like some piece of myself I never knew had been missing had finally found where it was meant to be.

As if he had heard my thoughts, Lore flicked his eyes to mine, our gazes locking together and holding as if our hearts were calling out to each other through the windows of our souls. For a brief second, his eyes flashed crimson as if his dragon was also answering the call. He tore his gaze away, and I felt a coldness creep in.

"We need to be ready," Lore said for what felt like the twentieth time.

Alastair merely grumbled in agreement. His own sword clutched in his hand as we stood outside the keep nearest to the worst of the decaying vines—those closest to the moon. Which seemed to loom larger than usual, an eerie shade of crimson outlining it like a death omen ready to strike us all down.

I knew wolves were already turning and prowling the land around my village. The humans were tucked in tight for the night, knowing instinctively the dangers of a night like this. The vampires would be out, ready to take a new meal and maybe even a life. The night was just beginning as the sun set. The last moment of light sank into the distant horizon as the land plunged into darkness.

Fear sent a lance of trepidation and anxiety through me. My gaze flicked to Lore, expecting him to change into his dragon. He didn't. Instead, he was powerless on the full moon. Helpless against the coming attack.

I longed to reach out, to bridge the gaping chasm of his self-imposed isolation. Tonight was not the time. Foreboding crawled across my skin as the moon rose higher in the sky, and the sun and moon held the sky together for the briefest moments. We needed to be focused on the trials ahead.

Still, I ached to offer him comfort. I knew now I could never take Lore's life, curse or no curse. I would stand with him against the bitter end

if need be. He was no longer just my captor—he had become my reason to keep fighting, my light in the darkness.

An eerie crimson glow spilled across the land as the last golden rays faded. The moon took its place high, swollen and bloody, seeming to bleed malevolence into the night.

Lore turned to me, features carved from stone. Under the surface, a storm raged in his wintry eyes. He stepped close, grasping my shoulders almost fiercely. His voice was gravel and smoke. "Stay near me." It was a command laced with barely restrained fear.

I covered his hand with mine, imbuing my words with all my heart. "Always."

He flinched at the contact, eyes sliding away. He still struggled to accept what shone so clearly to me. This was not the time to push.

In unspoken accord, we moved to the courtyard, weapons poised as we took our positions. The empty night stretched before us, silent and foreboding. We waited, united in purpose if not yet entirely in trust. The battle ahead would forge us, one way or another.

When the first ululating shrieks split the air, Lore's hand found mine, gripping fiercely. The horde approached. We would face them back-to-back. The curse's hourglass trickled down as the dead descended under the scarlet moon. May the goddess have mercy—for we would show none tonight.

With blades singing death's song, we charged forth to meet our destiny. If this was our end, we would greet it without fear.

Only what came over the wall first was not the undead that I had expected, but a different kind. It was my father.

CHAPTER 26

Bella

Roderick Val' Draco stood stark against the crimson moon, his figure outlined in the crimson light as he stared down at me from the wall. An odd mixture of irritation and relief flashed across his features.

"Daughter, Isabella. It is time to go home." He reached out his hand as if I would eagerly go to him. I swallowed hard and took a step back, shaking my head.

I stood shocked, rooted in place as I stared at him, my eyes wide and my mouth slightly ajar as time seemed to still. Shock surged through my veins, sending shivers down my spine. My heart skipped a beat, and my breath caught in my throat. It was as if the world around me faded into the background, leaving only this person in sharp focus.

My father.

"That is no home of mine," I spat, my hands clenching. The sword's pommel gripped in my right hand and bit into my skin. In my left hand, I felt my nails cutting crescent moons into my palms so deep I was sure I would bleed.

"Do you want everyone in the castle to die tonight?" he asked, and his demeanor became more threatening. "I came here to save you, my dear. Come with me. They are coming, and this cursed place is about to meet its end."

"I won't. You don't own me!" I screamed at my torturer. My father, the man who'd shown me just enough love as a child to keep me sane, only to twist it when he had lost everything and turned it all around on me. As if I

should be grateful to him for my existence, I should be grateful I had half his blood. I should be thankful every time he hit and belittled me that I was still in this wretched world for him to do it. The past slammed into me, and I felt myself folding in on myself. I shook my head, taking another step back. "No," I repeated.

"You are the reason I lost everything," Roderick snarled. "My throne, my kingdom—all stolen from me because of your pathetic existence." His eyes blazed with centuries of festering hatred and vengeance. "The goddess wanted you. She wanted to destroy you for whatever reason and instead destroyed our kingdom! Now she and I have an understanding. I was given passage by Nyx herself to come here and take you home."

Lore looked over at me, fear flashing in his gaze as his eyes flicked from me to my father and back again as if, once again, the knowledge of who I was lodged between us like a knife point.

"You're Val' Draco? The son of Queen Isabella?" Lore stared at my father with loathing—the same loathing and hate he'd once looked upon me with. Now, as if he was again reminded that I was his enemy, he began to distance himself. I watched as his eyes closed off to me and then narrowed, his body turning a fraction away from me. Once again, we were enemies.

Roderick nodded. Though Lore had noted my similar appearance to Queen Isabella, he had not suspected how close of a familial relationship. I was only a small step from the throne, which seemed to change his demeanor.

His posture stiffened as he tore his gaze away, and his face hardened. His forearm muscles were tight, and they seemed to twitch as he gripped his sword tighter. I wondered if he was thinking of using it on me. He looked at me as if he didn't even know me, and then a sadness passed over his eyes like a storm cloud.

"It's not who I am!" I exclaimed, trying to draw his attention to me. All he did was tighten his jaw and refuse to look at me. "I tried to tell you."

His gaze snapped to mine. His nostrils flared as his lips twisted into a bitter smile. "You didn't, did you. You pretended this connection to the dead queen was nothing." He shook his head, his head dipping down as a low, anguished chuckle escaped his lips. "It's best if you leave anyways," he whispered so low I barely heard him. An average person without vampire blood wouldn't have heard it, but I did. "It'll be safer."

"No!" I yelled, turning toward him with my sword held high. "You'll have to fight me too. I'm not leaving you." There was a plea in each word I spoke. For a moment, I believed my words had gotten to him. That he would change his mind as something soft, almost tender, crossed his expression. Before I could even decipher why, his face darkened and hardened. His features turned so cold a chill shivered down my back.

"Leave now. Or I'll make you," he commanded, a steel edge in his words.

"No. No, no, no," I begged, dropping my sword and pleading with him. My voice softened, going lower. "Please don't make me leave you."

My father jumped down and moved closer to me as I backed away, casting frantic looks at Lore and pleading for him to help. The moon goddess couldn't just grant him permission to circumvent the curse, even if she was the one who acted on it. Could she? I was about to turn and run when Lore's words stopped me as if the fight had instantly deflated from me.

"You already have," he said right before his gaze flicked to behind me, and my world went dark as something hard slammed into my head.

I awoke with a gasp, my head throbbing. Blinking against the dim light, I realized I was back in the hovel I had once shared with my father. The chill of the dirt floor seeped into my bones as I shifted upright, my heart sinking.

He had sent me away after all. No, not just that he had sent me away. He had closed off to me, denying what was real. Denying us in the face of a truth that wasn't important—my ancestors and a family I didn't have a claim to. They didn't make me who I was. No, he had thrown me away. Worst, from the throbbing of my head, someone had knocked me out, and he'd allowed it. Throwing me away like yesterday's garbage.

Hurt cut me deep as I felt the betrayal in my heart, my soul, my very being. It made me take gulping breaths as I tried to steady my heart. The

pain was too much to process. It felt as if someone had stabbed me directly in the heart and twisted the knife.

I was broken, shattered into little pieces that splattered and soaked into the ground like blood, only to be trampled on by the soles of those who were meant to protect me, to love me.

I forced my heart to calm, to push the pain away, and to focus. As I pressed against the thin door, I could make out two muffled voices—Roderick and Gideon. I shuddered at the alpha wolf's deep guttural tones, fear creeping down my spine.

"It's agreed then," Roderick said. "You help me reclaim my throne, and the girl is yours."

Gideon gave a dark chuckle. "Oh, I'll enjoy taming that fiery spirit of hers and making her submit. She'll birth me strong pups."

Revulsion churned my stomach. I would die before letting that monster lay a hand on me again.

Slowly, their scheming voices faded as they moved away. I sagged back, bitterness welling up to mingle with heartache. Lore had rejected me so coldly in the end. I wanted to rage at him, to demand why he had done this to me, to us.

Sorrow drowned my anger. I knew that tortured look in his eyes as he commanded me to leave. He tried to protect and spare me from the curse's dark fate. Lore had come to care for me, even if he refused to admit it aloud. I had seen the truth in our stolen moments of bliss.

I pressed my fists against my chest, aching with loss. It didn't matter if Lore pushed me away out of misguided nobility or if he despised my vampire heritage. All that mattered was that I loved him despite our differences. I would return to his side, no matter the cost, because hope remained. I'd heard him say the words, you'll be safer. He'd done it to save me. Pushing me away like he always did. Well, it wasn't going to happen. Not this time.

With grim determination, I began to work the ties that bound me, planning my escape. Tonight, the wolves would be distracted by the blood moon's spell. If I was quick and clever, I could evade them.

Soon, they were loosened enough I could slip my hands through. I rubbed the raw areas where the rope had chafed my skin, tearing the skin from my flesh. My finger skittered over the scar I had gotten from the vines, and my heart tore anew. How would I get in there if I couldn't get

past the vines? Fear lanced through me as I thought about the piercing screams we'd heard before Roderick showed up and his eerie words that the curse was coming to an end.

Lore needed me, whether he realized it or not. I refused to abandon him to the curse's cruel conclusion. If my place was at his side, then so be it—I would stand with him until the bitter end.

My heart galloped with mingled fear and exhilaration as I slipped into the shadows. One way or another, I would find my way back to my dragon prince. Let the moon goddess rage—she could not keep us apart. Lore was my destiny, and I his. Nothing, not even a curse, could change that.

Tonight, we would break the curse, even if I died trying.

CHAPTER 27

Bella

Deja vu hit me as, once again, I ran through the forbidden woods in the cold. The snow was no longer on the ground, but winter still seemed to have its tight grip on the land as the wind picked up and chilled me to the marrow in my bones.

I had run at a decent pace until I heard the howling of the wolf packs behind me. I ran with everything I had, letting the blood moon light my way through the trees and the mist. It felt like forever when the vines appeared, and I searched for a way in. Even with the decay, there was no safe way in or through.

A growl tore through the night, and I turned to see the fawn-colored wolf staring at me, its head lowered and its teeth on full display. Gideon. He growled and then paced back and forth.

"Stop. Let me go." I threw up my hands, pleading with him. "I wasn't meant to be yours." I admitted, not daring to take my eyes off the wolf in front of me even as the shrieks of the undead and the sounds of battle echoed from the castle courtyard.

There was an attack happening at this very minute. Fear lanced through me as a strong desire to get to Lore made me turn my head to glance over my shoulder, back toward the people I cared about.

Lore was surrounded, and I couldn't see Alastair anywhere. Thorns were in my way.

What if Billy was hurt? Or Alysha, too? These people had become my family in a short period, more than my own blood. They needed me, and

I'd be damned if I wasn't going to be there for them. I scanned the vines, trying to find a way to climb them without getting stung. I didn't think. Just as the growls from Gideon became louder, he pounced, then broke off with a yelp as I jumped on the first vine. I climbed quickly until I was on top of the wall. I didn't assess any cuts; instead, I looked to see where the fight was.

I saw them just a few hundred yards away across the courtyard, battling the undead bodies that crawled in pieces along the ground. It was horrifying to watch. It was then I saw, for the first time, a newcomer.

A woman with obsidian hair watched the carnage before turning to me. Our eyes collided, and I was held transfixed in her pitch-black depths. The stars shone back at me as I stared, unable to look away.

A slow, malicious grin spread across her lips, and with a flick of her wrist, a grating noise began. The growls of dozens of wolves who had just been howling from a distance seemed closer. Yet I was still unable to look away.

My feet worked on their own as they moved closer to her. The wolves began to scramble over the fence as if assisted. As if they merely walked in. Though I felt their nearness, I dared not look away from the nightmare gaze of the woman who forced my feet forward.

With horror, I realized this was the same goddess who had destroyed the Vampire Court. Only her hair was darker. The moon goddess, Nyx. She held me in her grasp, and vengeance sparkled in her gaze.

As I stared, I saw it all—more than one mere mortal should see. I saw her destroy the Vampire Court all over again, an act of fury as she toppled it to the ground, searching for something—no, for someone— for me.

"Hello, Isabella," she purred, her voice lyrical and sweet yet rich and decadent. "I'm glad you could make it to watch him meet his end."

She flicked her wrist at the wolves behind me, and Gideon and his pack descended on Lore, who was now panting. His sword was heavy in his hand, and he seemed barely able to lift it.

The wolves surrounded him, pacing, growling, and hunched, ready to strike. They didn't—not yet. They waited. They waited for orders from the goddess who controlled them. As she held me now, even I fell under her command because of my vampire blood.

Nyx pulled me forward with her as if I were held by a string. Try as I might, I couldn't stop or break free. I struggled against it.

"Let me go!" I demanded, panic in every thought and action. The panic increased as I looked at Lore. He'd fallen to his knees in the dirt, his sword gone.

"Look what I found," Nyx called out to Lore. "So close."

"Let her go and I will submit to the curse," Lore said, not taking his gaze from Nyx. Not sparing me one glance.

"It's not you submitting to the curse I want," Nyx sang in an odd tone that sounded too sweet and gleeful for the moment. "I want to see you die. And I want her to watch it."

Lore's gaze finally met mine. So much was conveyed in that one look, that one heartbeat of a fraction of time. The words he could never say before shone in his gaze, no longer hidden. It was love. The kind that burned so hot it could engulf me entirely. It was there, deep and unending, a chasm of emotion that turned bitterly into heartache as I watched the acceptance and resolve form.

With his lips pressed into a tight line, he nodded once.

"Any last words?" Nyx cooed to him. "Go ahead and say what we both know you want to say. Then I'll give you a gift—a chance to break the curse." Her lips twisted with cruelty as if she delighted in his pain, in his desperation. "I've waited a long time for this."

Lore said nothing as he tried to stand, to move toward me.

"You took what was most precious from me, Dragon Prince," she thundered, pointing an accusatory finger at Lore. "My beloved daughter, murdered by your savage, unprovoked attack." Hot, angry tears streamed down her pale cheeks. "An innocent child, paying the price for your bloodlust." The ground trembled with her rage and anguish.

"Your people, trapped forevermore between life and death, forgotten by time itself continuing on for eternity. Even after your death here today." Her voice dropped to a vicious whisper. "I have enjoyed watching you all these years, forced to watch helplessly as madness consumed you."

Lore ignored her and held my gaze. "I have only one regret in this life. That I could not love you longer." He lifted his sword high, ready to plunge it into his chest. Before he could, Nyx shrieked, and her magic erupted, slowing him and forcing him to push harder. Power shot from her fingertips like moonlit death tendrils reaching to stop him.

Everything froze, and in the blink of a second, so many emotions erupted from me: love, pain, regret, and resolve. I knew what I had to do

and what I was meant to do. I'd lived in the pathetic world for long enough—alone, abused, and unloved. Lore was the first thing in my life that was good. The first time, my heart beat in a way that felt beyond words to describe. Loving him made me feel warm, complete, and safe. More than that, I recalled his dragon's words to me.

I stood paralyzed, my fate crystallizing before me with terrible clarity. *This wasn't happening. This wasn't real.*

Lore's eyes found mine across the battle-scarred courtyard, infinite anguish in their wintry depths. I saw the truth then—he had known all along what ghastly sacrifice the prophecy demanded. Yet he had spared me that terrible burden, determined to defy our cursed destiny.

He had tried to break the curse to save me from trying to break it.

My heart shattered, realizing the sacrifice he was willing to make for me, for his people. I could not let Lore meet such a cruel end. He deserved happiness, not eternal subjugation to a bitter goddess's curse.

I saw his darkness, and it did not scare me. I saw his darkness and gave it light as he took mine and did the same. I loved every part of him—the good, the bad, and all the ugly parts he tried to hide. I saw it, and I still loved him. No, I loved him even more because he was right: we were two puzzle pieces that were incomplete without the other.

He would burn the world for me, but I'd burn it for him. There was no life without him with me. This world was not done with him. I would always be his, and he would always be mine. I refused to live even a second without him in this world, the world of the living. So I decided right there, in that second, in that stilled moment. I acted.

A burst of energy erupted from me, and my feet moved faster than they had ever done—faster than if I had been a full-blooded vampire. It was me who met the tip of his blade at my back and the blast of power that erupted from Nyx.

I stared into his eyes one last time as the blast slammed through me, and the magic burned me from the inside out. I held his silvery blue gaze as the pain hit me in an instant.

Soon, everything started up again, and Nyx's powers could no longer hold time still as the stars began to twinkle once again in the distance. It was time.

"I love you too," I gasped as I felt blood trickle from my lips, and the world around me began to grow cold as darkness seemed to fade into my

vision. "Forgive me," I whispered.

I was weightless, the night air cold in my lungs. Lore's eyes widened in dawning horror as I threw myself between him and the cursed blade. His raw cry of anguish echoed across time as the sword pierced my heart.

Each beat of my heart slowed, and each breath became more labored.

I heard a roar erupt from the distance and thought someone held me, but I couldn't feel it. My limbs and my body no longer hurt, and I felt nothing. The world darkened and faded away forever.

As my eyes moved on their own, looking upward to the sky, to the stars, I was ready. In that suspended moment, I memorized each beloved detail of Lore's face. I wanted him to be my last sight.

"I love you," I gasped through bloodied lips. A blinding blaze erupted within me, scorching away the darkness. The last thing I heard was Lore's ragged sobs as oblivion claimed me.

I welcomed death.

CHAPTER 28

Lore

I held her limp and bleeding body in my arms as I felt pain like no other in all my centuries tear through me. Sobs wracked my body as I yelled for her to come back. To stay with me as I prayed, pleaded, and cursed all in one breath, the woman in my arms who saw the world no longer.

For the woman who had defied me, stood up to me at my worst, who had taken a curse that was not hers and tried to break it; to a woman who had once planned to kill me but instead had fallen in love with me, a monster.

"I love you," I cried, clutching her to my chest. Tears sprang from my eyes for the first time in so long. I had long believed myself incapable of crying, but now the tears came freely. I held her for what felt like an eternity as time stood still, as the goddess stood over me and screamed her displeasure. Because all around us, the castle was waking up from a long slumber, and people who had not moved in almost a millennia stumbled around, dazed and confused. I cared for none of it.

Only the pale-haired woman who was in my arms. I would take the curse back if it meant having her back. I'd never told her what the curse needed to break because I feared she'd do precisely what she had done: sacrifice herself for me, for my people. Because as much as she had tried to hide it, she was a good person. Now she was dead because of me. A part of me broke then. My soul splintered into two as I stared down at her, memorizing the details of her face.

I held her, rocking her, pleading to anyone who would listen to save her. I cursed myself to save her. I deserved it. "Allora, goddess of the sun. I call upon you. Take my life for hers," I pleaded as the night began to turn into day, and I clutched the body of the only woman I'd ever loved. The woman destined to love me, to be my mate, my one true love, Isabella.

I barely registered the coming of a warmth that burned like the sun until I felt her presence.

"Be gone. Your time is done," a soft voice said behind me.

"This—this was not supposed to happen!" Nyx screeched in her rage before I felt the coolness of the moon slowly dissipate as it no longer shone in the sky. Only then did I dare to look up from the face I wanted to burn into my memory.

Only then did I beg my goddess, who had not answered my prayers all these centuries. The goddess of my people who had forsaken me to my fate. "Please," I begged. Just then, I noticed the crowd gathering. The crowd of people I'd looked on in horror every day for centuries, frozen in place. Enchanted to all eyes but my own. Those who unknowingly suffered the curse crowded around us. I wanted to snap and snarl at them. Because my heart was gone, dead and growing colder, and pain was festering inside me. "Take me instead. Give her life back and take mine."

Allora shook her head. Then she paused as if listening for something. She tilted her head and watched the woman in my arms, a tenderness spreading across her features. "You should put Isabella down and step away."

I clutched her tighter, shaking my head.

"Then you will burn," Allora warned, her voice turning grave.

I felt it. The warmth emanating from Bella began to grow hotter. I turned to Allora, horrified at the thought of her burning Bella's body. She merely watched in curiosity. Something else crossed her face: the look of pride and a tenderness that I'd seen on Alysha's face when she looked at Billy or my mother when Lara and I were children.

The unconditional love of a mother to a child. That's when I saw it. The similarities. She had the same shade of moonlit hair as hers and Allora's twin sister Nyx. The same delicate features and dainty chin. Her lips, plump and shaped like a bow, were stretched in the same half-grin as Bella's when amused. Her frame and body were the same petite shape. Allora's eyes shone like the sun's reflection; meeting her gaze was like

feeling its warmth on my face. Yet, if you stared too long, it would burn and blind you.

Bella's eyes were always like storm clouds on a rainy day, ready to flash with thunder and lightning at any moment. There was no denying the similarities. Though Nyx and Allora were twins, the only shared trait they had in appearance was the same moonlit hair. Touched by moonlight and the fierceness of the sun's rays.

My thoughts escaped me as I felt the heat from Bella's body turn into a painful blaze. I nearly dropped her but fought through the pain. I couldn't let her go. I wouldn't let her go. I'd burn with her.

Then, as if I no longer had control over my body, my hands slowly placed her on the ground, and my feet shuffled back to the side of the sun goddess, Allora.

"You'll thank me later," she said with a bemused smile.

"You, you are—" I said to her as I watched Bella with that familiar pain eating me away.

"I am," she cut me off before I could admit the words bouncing in my head. Bella was her kin. "Now, be patient, Lore. I made a mistake leaving her with her father. The kingdom of the sun isn't a good place for a mortal child and a mother that can only be there half the day isn't enough."

Allora watched Bella calmly, and I watched alongside her. Even at that moment, I wanted to go to her, grab her, and take her into my arms, meeting her in death's cold embrace. Now the heat from her body could be felt from where I stood, and I let the compulsion go and waited, hoping for a miracle.

Fire erupted, and panic sat in. I fought against the sun goddess's magic as I railed and pushed to be released, to go to her, and to meet her fate in the same way, together forever.

"Stop it," Allora muttered. "Stop with these morbid poetic thoughts you have bouncing in your head and wait."

Allora's voice held a command, a power that spoke to me, to my dragon. That's when I felt him, felt his emotions, heard his thoughts, and sensed him there for the first time in almost a millennia. We were one once again. My dragon told me to trust, to be calm, and to be patient. So I took a deep breath, and I listened.

Even when I watched the body of my beloved, my heart, catch on fire and burn until she was nothing but ashes. Even when the smoke cleared

and the day continued, I knelt on the cold ground, refusing to look or talk to anyone, waiting for a promise that never came.

At first, nothing happened, but then Bella's skin began to glow from within, as though embers were smoldered under her flesh. The light intensified until her entire body was wreathed in blazing fire. I shielded my eyes against the scorching heat.

A memory of a story my mother once read to me about the phoenix came to mind. She had called them the children of the sun goddess. Of allure and from sacrifice and death, they would rise from the ashes, anew and powerful.

When I could see again, ashes were all that remained. My heart shattered anew as doubt crept in. Then—movement. A small red-gold bird emerged from the cinders, feathers burning with living flame. The phoenix stretched its wings and trilled triumphantly before shapeshifting into Bella, reborn. Transformed into the body of the woman I loved and thought I had lost forever, Isabella stood before me, naked and whole. My world was right once again.

I let out a breath, a sob, and all the anguish that had consumed me as I clutched her to my chest.

"I love you." I kissed her. "I love you," I repeated over and over, not believing she was here, whole and alive.

"When I said pounce on it, I didn't mean in front of the whole kingdom!" Alysha rushed forward with a cloak, wrapping it around Bella as the kingdom gawked at us. "This is not the best way for the kingdom to see their queen, now is it?"

"Queen?" Bella asked, dazed before her eyes snapped to Allora's. "I…" she began before her voice warbled. "I heard you."

"Of course you did, my child. You never left this world. You were merely waiting for your new beginning." Allora stepped forward and took Bella's hands.

"Why, why would you leave me here with him? With them?" she asked the goddess, her mother, the question only an abandoned child could ask the parents who didn't want her.

"Because where I go, you cannot follow, and I could not imagine a world for you without the warmth of the sun. Every time you tilted your face to the warmth of my rays, I was there." A bright golden tear trailed down her mother's face. "But I must go because holding this body for too

long is taxing, and it took a great deal of energy to help guide you to your phoenix and rise from death's ashes."

Bella nodded, her disappointment clear in her expression. Before she released the goddess's hands, she wrapped her arms around Allora, and I heard her whisper, "Thank you, Mother."

As one, Bella and I turned to the newly un-cursed kingdom of dragons.

CHAPTER 29

Bella

I looked out across the growing crowd, and a lump of pain and regret stuck in my throat as I thought about the one person in the many who would never awaken. The one I had killed in my rage and attempt to make a point. The pieces of a king and queen who would never see their son in love or their kingdom restored.

Because they lay in broken pieces on dirty thrones long since unused.

Billy broke through the crowd and ran until his arms wrapped around me, and his toothy grin was slightly less gaping as I realized somewhere along the way his adult tooth had begun to grow in. Change had been happening under our noses this whole time. "I knew you'd be the one to break it!" he exclaimed, squeezing me hard.

Alastair followed close behind as he affectionately ruffled the boy's hair and kissed Alysha firmly. She leaned into him and sighed, her arms wrapping around his neck.

"Eww!" Billy groaned, pretending to gag.

Alysha only clutched tighter at the man who had stuck with her for centuries before she tore herself from his lips and winked at me. “Now, that’s a good pounce,” she said breathlessly.

“I thought you said bounce,” I teased as Lore began to pull me toward the gathering crowd.

“No, that comes later.” She giggled as Alastair smirked and pulled her tight to his side. Lore did the same to me as the crowd grew.

“My people, I know not what you remember in your time during the curse,” he called out to the crowd, his voice loud and commanding as it carried across the courtyard.

“We remember everything,” a voice called from the back.

Lore watched them, haunted, as if he'd been tormented by them—and he had, but in a different way. I squeezed his hand in comfort, and he squeezed back.

I'm here for you, I whispered in the recesses of my mind. A soft smile played at the corners of Lore's lips, and I thought for a moment he had heard me.

Nods and grunts of agreement filtered through the crowded space. My heart plummeted for them. So much time locked in stillness, and aware of it the whole time. It was unthinkable. I searched the crowd, seeing them. Some were still half aware, as if trying to reconcile their new reality; others were sobbing in the back, either from the torture they had endured or from joy. This kingdom was in tatters; its people were as broken as the king and queen who had once ruled them.

Allora, who had been distant and quiet until this moment, walked up to stand beside me, taking my hand in hers. "My children. I understand the pain you've endured because of my sister, Nyx. While I cannot change what has been done or the past, I give you peace as a present to you for my daughter. You will remember your time as if it was a distant dream and no more." As if she, too, spoke in my mind, I heard her whisper, "O*r you shall all surely go mad."*

I met her sunshine gaze, and she nodded to confirm I'd caught her thoughts. She said in my head, *Phoenixes have special abilities you will learn to harness one day, daughter. One of those abilities is projecting thoughts and reading them from those you connect with. It will serve you well as the queen.*

A figure dressed in tattered clothes stormed through the courtyard in a fury. "The king and queen are dead!" the man cried. The crowd was lost to fear and pain because I remembered Lore telling me his family was very much loved in this kingdom.

As suddenly as the crying began, they all turned to Lore and bowed, getting to their knees in the dirt before chanting, "Long live the king, King Lore."

Lore swallowed as I watched him. Even all these years away from court, it was as if he pulled on the persona of royalty with effortless ease while I stood there naked but with a cloak and newly risen from the dead. He kissed my hand and lifted it to the crowd. "This woman saved us all. She is to be my wife. Long live your queen, Queen Isabella."

The crowd dropped to their knees again and repeated the phrase, this time with gratitude and love shining from their eyes as the memory of their torture slipped from their minds. The castle was once again awake, alive, and ready for what time had in store for them.

I turned to Lore, lifting an eyebrow. "Who said anything about marriage or being queen?" I demanded as Lore gave me a sheepish smile.

"You love me?" he asked slyly with a seductive smile stretching across his lips.

"Yes," I said with deliberate slowness, wondering why he would ask me that question.

He dropped to his knees in front of me—in front of his kingdom, my mother, our friends, and our family—and looked up at me, his bright blue eyes flashing crimson for a moment. "Isabella Val' Draco, daughter of Roderick and Allora, is my heart, my soul, and my reason for living. Will you marry me?"

Cheers erupted in the courtyard as I stared into the face I'd planned to kill, only to fall madly in love with, and nodded.

Finally, we both got our happily ever after—or, as Alysha would say, a pounce and a bounce.

Epilogue

Returning the lands that had once belonged to Lore's kingdom proved more challenging than expected as we traveled this new world. A millennia of changes awaited Lore, and with each new discovery, I watched his facelift in amazement.

"What do they call this?" he asked as he licked the treat, now running rivulets down his hand.

"It's called ice cream," I answered, licking my double chocolate cone. There had been very few times in my life that I'd had the delicacy created by the humans of this land a decade past. My first time had been at the castle when my Nan had brought it to me. That one had been chocolate, too. It was my favorite.

I watched as Lore let out a moan, and I felt my cheeks heat as I thought about another time he'd moaned with his tongue. I stood as I wiped my hands with a napkin and steadied myself by grabbing Lore's arm.

Lore's eyes went to my body as it traveled up, a heated look crossing features. "You are so beautiful," he murmured, taking another languid lick of the ice cream as his tongue licked upward.

"Stop it," I hissed, looking around.

We'd been busy these months, rebuilding the kingdom and creating a new world for Lore's people and ours. With me on the throne beside him, I wanted no lines drawn. We weren't moon territory or sun territory. We were just a kingdom; anyone willing to live in peace was welcome. At least, that was the dream.

Thus far, it had been a challenging journey. Tonight would be my official coronation, and people from all over were journeying to see the king and queen of the forgotten kingdom slowly returned to the eldest of our lands.

"We should have ice cream in the castle every day," Lore mumbled, his eyes trailing over me lazily. "But you know what I want more than anything?" he asked with a wide grin.

"What is that?" I asked.

"You." He stood, discarding the finished ice cream, and pulled me toward him. He pushed the strands of hair away from my face with a gentle tenderness that melted my heart. "Nothing tastes as sweet as you. "

I leaned into Lore with a sigh as he claimed my lips with his, kissing me with such tenderness I felt his love to the core of my being. With a chuckle, he pulled away.

"Az says you need to just go to our room with me and never leave," he purred in my ear. His hot breath fanned across my neck as I arched into him, wanting him to touch me more.

"Well, Az is the smart one." I nodded. I lost all thought as his hands caressed down my body until I was purring against him, my creature peeking out—my phoenix. She had yet to tell me her name, but I felt her presence increasingly as we got to know one another, sharing the same body.

"I think she agrees." He nuzzled my neck, and I moaned against him, only to regretfully pull away as I realized we had an audience slowly forming—one that looked to us to lead them. People who had once looked down on me for my heritage now bowed as I passed.

I'd yet to reconcile the two, but I tried every day. I reminded myself to never stoop to their level and be the change I'd wanted to see. Some days were easier than others. With Lore, each day was a new adventure.

"Are you ready to be crowned queen, officially?" Lore asked as he lifted my hand to his lips and kissed my fingers.

"I'm ready to stand by your side forever, yes." I nodded, realizing as my heart expanded that I meant every word. It was as if destiny clicked into place, and finally, I was exactly where I was meant to be.

Did you enjoy this retelling?

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About the Author

Meet Riley Hunt, the mastermind behind enchanting tales of romantic fantasy, urban escapades, and paranormal adventures, all starring fierce female protagonists who take charge of their destinies. Hailing from the charming state of Maryland, Riley's love for adventure knows no bounds – who knows where her next escapade will take her?

Armed with a master's degree in Education, Riley has traded in the traditional classroom for the boundless realms of her imagination. Instead of teaching literature, she now creates the captivating stories she once longed to share with her students.

An avid coffee aficionado, Riley's love for caffeine knows no bounds, often finding herself indulging in one too many cups. A self-proclaimed proud nerd, her office is adorned with a colorful array of Star Wars, Doctor Who, Buffy, and Marvel memorabilia, serving as constant inspiration for her imaginative tales.

She also writes young adult fantasy under Trish Beninato. Don't forget to sign up for her subscriber list and get a free ebook This Way to Hell! www.trishbeninato.com/subscribe

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